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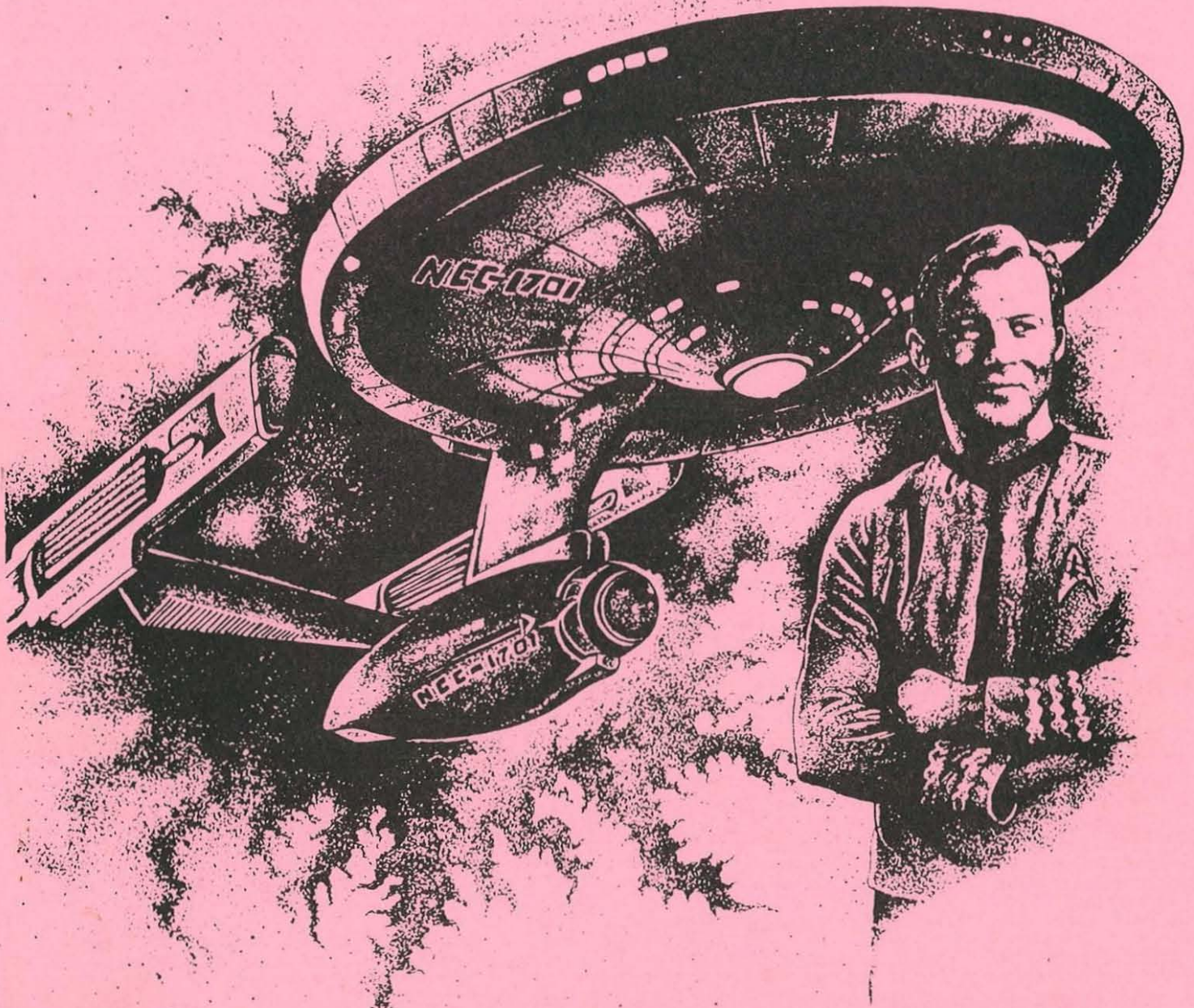


Illustration
LOG

ENTRIES
74

a STAR TREK

FANZINE

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ScoTpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona

Hello, and welcome to Enterprise - Log Entries 74.

We would like to welcome Pac Deacon to our contributors this issue with "Expeditionary Force", which features Harry Mudd. If you have not already heard, we are sure you will be sorry to learn that Roger C. Carmel, who played the flamboyant Harry with such panache, died last November. He will be fondly remembered by all of fandom.

Sheila is currently typing another story by Pac, a novella called "Orion Incident", which we hope to have ready for the autumn.

Pac tells us that her training in literary appreciation was on the Continental model; this includes some differences in paragraphing and punctuation from the style taught in many of today's British schools, and makes for a very individual style which we think you will find interesting.

Since we have been asked so often recently, Sheila and I have begun work on Variations 9; we cannot think about a publication date yet, but it will probably be next year.

Since we changed to computer typing, I had been enjoying a holiday from distractions, in that my cat Shah no longer had any stencils to chew. However, I am typing this editorial at Sheila's, and she has recently acquired a very small kitten called Whiskers, who finds the computer keyboard a source of great entertainment. (I did suggest she change his name to Kor, since as anyone who has any experience of very small kittens knows, they do tend to 'Kling-on' with great tenacity.) Sorry.

Sheila and I hope to be at Midcon, and look forward to seeing some of you there. Unfortunately Janet and Shona are unlikely to be with us, due to work commitments.



We welcome submissions of fiction, poetry and artwork for ScoTpress zines. We are looking for series-based action-adventure stories, preferably with some character inter-relationship. Alternate universe stories are acceptable, but even these should not be movie-based, K/S, or involve the death of main characters, or be primarily about other ships. These re after all, "The voyages of the Starship Enterprise..."

Submissions may be sent to either -

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YOUR YOUNG MEN SHALL SEE VISIONS

by

Gillian Novell

The Enterprise slipped sweetly into orbit around Charon III, a class M world whose inhabitants had not long before applied for membership of the Federation. The Enterprise was the nearest vessel when the request was finally processed and those who gave the orders in these matters considering - and with no little cause - that diplomats might be found as well on a starship as anywhere else, despatched the ship and her crew to judge this people's fitness for admission. So here she was with, Dr. McCoy hoped, an easy few days ahead of her.

"Well, Jim," he'd said after he heard where they were going, "it'll be a nice cosy bit of diplomacy, being important, strolling round looking at everything - do it standing on your head with both arms tied behind your back!" Kirk had grinned a tired grin, and said he hoped so.

They were all long overdue for shore-leave, and the previous weeks had held too many perils for men to face much more without breaking - especially if those men could not allow themselves to bend. The doctor himself was feeling the strain, but knew his limitations well enough to guard against the kind of fatigue a less relaxed man might have suffered.

Not so the Captain, who felt the burden of command dragging on him a little more each day, each day his insidiously growing weariness leaving him a little more defenceless, a little nearer the cracking point. Even Spock - and surely that was a measure of the tension prevailing - was verging upon the irritable, cutting his repartee short and spending most of his time alone in his quarters.

McCoy sighed as he watched his dearest charges and knew that the two days of preparation (rest) he had recommended (ordered) prior to their visit to the planet would be nothing like enough. Oh well. Every little helped.

The 'preparation' over, their visit passed as smoothly as silk for the first three days, Charon reckoning.

Kirk had decided that the landing party should consist of top-ranking officers, so the transporter effect faded to show himself, Spock and McCoy, Scott, Uhura, Yeoman Michel and Yeoman Taylor standing before plump President Marten and the waiting representatives of the hopeful planet.

Everything was immaculate. Kirk would not have believed that all could be so perfect - the people happy, the government benevolent, the cities clean - as he remarked somewhat sourly to Spock, back in the guest suite after a particularly fault-free afternoon, "Perfection begins to pall after a bit; I can't believe in a place that's so perfect - there must be a flaw somewhere!"

"Indeed, Captain," Spock replied, "I am becoming increasingly convinced that we are being steered away from something - as though being shown a dazzling showpiece to attract attention away from some less glamorous artifact."

"Spock, we've seen everything - schools, hospitals, government, civil authority, lawyers, courts, offices, cities, villages, monuments - and all filled with happy people. What's missing?"

"I will tell you what is missing," said a tall-voiced man in the doorway. Kirk turned, startled, and recognised him as Juxor, the holder of the office of Chief Justice, who had conducted them on a fascinating tour of the extensive courts the previous day. "The prisons are missing - the prisons and their prisoners. This planet is not worthy to be admitted to the Federation, and when you have seen our prisons you will know why."

Kirk, by this time recovering from the unexpected intrusion, began to ask questions - where, how - why? But the man raised a hand.

"I was never here, Captain." He turned and vanished through the door.

They looked at one another in silence. *How could we have missed it?*

A few seconds had changed the atmosphere from one of balmy frustration to one vital with enquiry, but there were no answers to be had yet. There was nothing to do but wait until morning.

When morning came and the complacent President arrived as prelude to wishing his visitors godspeed, Kirk achieved a certain sense of satisfaction as he watched his reaction to their request to see the prisons. The initial alarm, anger, was at once covered over with the bland veneer characteristic of the man at all other times, but they saw it nevertheless.

"I'm sorry, Captain - I know it sounds callous, but they're so easy to forget! Being offworld - but Juxor will, I know, be only too pleased to take you to inspect them - and you will see just how exemplary they are."

"Offworld?" said McCoy. "You don't mean - not on this planet?"

But the President was engaged in an argument with Juxor who was trying to persuade him to conduct the inspection personally.

"I think that's exactly what he means, Bones," said Kirk. "This is becoming - strange."

Juxor lost his argument, and watched in barely controlled anger as the President bade farewell and swept quickly out of the room. He turned to them and made as if to speak, but as he did so three officials entered and prepared to join the party. He closed his mouth with a grimness that bode ill for whatever they were about to see, took a deep breath and said in an even voice, "If you will follow me, please."

"A prison planet!" McCoy's voice held all the revulsion that the naked idea suggested.

"Indeed, Doctor," Marten replied (He had joined them after all, a little before they left Charon, with the smugness and guilt of the cat who stole the cream.) "What would you rather have us do - execute them? Here, although exiled, they lead an existence that many of the galaxy's populations would willingly exchange for their own." Juxor's sharp intake of breath was clearly audible, and Kirk felt a twist of unease. Yes, something was going on here, beneath the perfect mask. He glanced at Spock, who looked back with troubled eyes.

"Tell us more about this - prison planet, Mr. President," Spock said in his blandest manner. "What caused you to create it initially - what punishments can you use?"

"Surely no punishment can match that of being a planetary exile."

The President smiled. "Our good doctor has hit the nail on the head. The punishment is exile - there is no other. Life is not luxurious, but we consider it enough that these men may never see their homes again."

"What about when their sentences are served? Surely they return then?"

"Banishment is for life, Captain. No-one who goes as prisoner to the fourth planet ever returns."

Their shuttle gently landed, but around them nothing moved. The planet being so near to Charon, its climate was little different - cooler, drier, but quite bearable even for Spock. "Discipline is good here."

As they stepped out onto this land, they each felt something slide through their minds and away again. Spock staggered, and Kirk's hand went out to steady him. "Something in the air," grimaced Juxor. "You never quite get used to it." The sense of unease grew.

They walked through what could have been the outlying fields of a young, growing settlement - grains, fruits, the country littered with strange natural low hills, obviously housing caves and dwellings.

"We are being watched, Captain," Spock quietly said.

Slowly the scrub around them began to move, and people, men, women and - "Children? You bring *children* here?" - emerged. They were all somewhat bewildered, and all had the appearance of being newly washed and dressed, as if for the occasion. *Note that*, thought Kirk.

Something in their eyes cleared to apprehension, and they started to smile. McCoy found himself holding the hands of two little children, eight or ten years old; Kirk's left arm was taken by a tall girl with wide eyes and long hair while at his right was a

tall man - her brother, by appearance; and Spock was surrounded by older men - men in whose eyes sat the wisdom of years, and who recognised some such quality in him. Uhura, Scott and the others were likewise surrounded. None of their hosts were - and when Kirk turned to express amazement, he was shocked to see tears standing out in Juxor's eyes, and his words trailed away.

What stood out in Marten's eyes was ill-veiled apprehension, and at last, having given his guests what he considered a good look round, he signalled that it was time to leave. At once the exiles around them began to wail, to keen like doomed spirits into the biting, eager air. They clung to them like children frightened of the dark. *Or souls about to be sent to into hell.*

"Don't go yet - please do not leave - there is so much to show you - stay for a little while! - Stay, stay, stay..." The desperation and fear gleamed in their eyes as they called out reasons for the strangers to stay. Pity shook McCoy, and he knelt on the ground and held close the two children who clung to him, tears in his own eyes as he did so.

And as he did so, he became aware of a third child, attracted by the others, holding his face in its little hands. It looked towards his companions, but their eyes were focused elsewhere. McCoy suddenly felt that he was about to hear something terribly important.

"This isn't all," the child said, "we all have bad dreams - bad dreams -"

The President roared and the children's eyes filled with terror as they fled from the doctor. Marten strode to him and fixed them with a look of death. They ran, screaming, into the caves.

The interruption confirmed to the prisoners that their visitors would leave - now. They were defeated and sad - and bitter. They had not heard what McCoy had been told.

"You call that anything near a contented existence?" McCoy was furious, stung to the quick by the large-eyed innocent faces that had instinctively turned to him in trust. "Those men and women were some of the most miserable I've ever seen - and to incarcerate - no, Jim, I can't find any other word for it - children - I don't know what your children do here, but I've known some little devils and they never did anything to warrant half what those people are suffering there now!"

Marten laboured to oil the waters. "Any visit we pay to them they see as a hope of returning to their homes," he said. "Of course they are not happy - they're in exile after all - what do you expect? I'm afraid you're not too good a judge of our youth, Doctor - we don't send children to the fourth planet lightly, I assure you."

"But - surely a less severe punishment should be found for - for the young ones! And if you have to send them there, let it be for a short time, then bring them home! They were no criminals, those children - you heard what they said - they have bad dreams!" He pleaded, but failed to notice the hardening on the surface of the President's face as he turned to the pilot to give the order to return to Charon.

Juxor touched McCoy and put his hand to his lips. Kirk and

Spock watched him. Something further was to come from this day's work.

Diplomats they were on this mission, not troubleshooters, and all had to hold their tongues on their return. It was quite clear what Kirk's recommendation would be, but it would not be polite to say it aloud. Marten seemed like a man with a good idea which hadn't worked out - there was a certain sadness about him now. *Maybe he doesn't have anything to hide*, thought Kirk. But the thought did not ring true. The President's attitude struck him as one of calm stemming from preparedness to face trouble rather than peace of mind.

McCoy and the others had beamed up the morning before, but Spock and Kirk, with final diplomatic ends to tie - and tired enough to take more time than they would otherwise have done - remained a little longer. It would have been so easy to forget those people on that sad planet, so conveniently out of sight, so conveniently silent now! The formalities of the visit were over - one more night and they would beam up to the Enterprise, watching the glory of Charon dawn, their spectacular farewell to this world, with all its hopes and - horrors.

This isn't all. We have bad dreams.

The summons came that night, a soft tap on the door where, dressed in black, Juxor stood, urgency on his face. He beckoned and it never occurred to either to question his coming. They slid down the building's corridors, silent furtive ghosts, until, creeping through a small door, they found themselves in a little room with no chairs or windows, but one other small door, which Juxor pointed out at once. "For escape."

He relaxed. "We are safe here - for a time. Yes, Captain, I know your questions - listen, and you will have your answers - all of them. I had hoped that your visit to the fourth planet would precipitate something - anything, some kind of crisis here, but I see that Marten is too clever - he has his men everywhere and if you leave tomorrow, and give him time to prepare for your coming again, you will never learn the truth."

"You are not being very coherent, sir," said Spock, "and our time is limited."

The other smiled tightly. "Yes, Mr. Spock, I know. Listen! The bald fact is that on that planet dwells a race of beings the like of which even you will have never encountered - they are not from this galaxy, but made their homes here; and they are the guardians of our prisoners.

Prison? That place isn't prison, it is hell. The creatures keep the prisoners in continual slavery, abjection - why do you think they have no thought of escape? They cannot escape because hope has been squeezed out of them by those foul things. They - they are like winged evil - I cannot describe them. I have to send men there - I am more culpable than the President, because I know and am revolted by what I see. He fears - fears that if he doesn't keep up a good supply of fresh meat, the creatures will come and feed on us."

"Juxor, those people we saw - those children - they were distressed, frightened even - but they didn't appear to be physically

harmred at all. What do these creatures - these 'guardians' do to them?"

"They feed on fear, Captain. Don't reject it - don't you remember the child saying 'we all have bad dreams'? Yes, I heard it - and so did Marten."

Kirk turned to Spock, that expression of suppressed curiosity, thrilling him in spite of the danger, standing clearly on his face. "Spock - is it possible that such a creature could exist?"

"Certainly, Captain - we have already encountered one such being, if you remember..."

"Of course - *Redjac*."

"Indeed. A similar entity, feeding on fear - but somewhat more vulnerable than these seem to be."

"And more easily destroyed."

Juxor, acutely aware of their danger, and not sharing the memories of the other two, shifted uneasily. "These creatures - " he began, and then broke off as noises came - the noises of confusion, of consternation, of conspirators discovered. He frantically bundled them towards the second door. "Go now - go and destroy that place, wipe it out of existence! Yes, destroy a thousand men and women and children - but destroy the others as well! Go quickly! I will try to gain you some time."

As they went, Spock turned to look at him. He looked quietly back - "Go, my friends. It is time I paid the price," and turned away.

When the pursuers found him he was sitting meditating, and as he died he sent his hope outwards in the desperate final wish that these two might achieve all that he had asked.

Kirk and Spock ran - ran and ducked and swerved until all sense of direction had fled them. It was by chance that they approached the shuttle in which they had visited the ill-fated planet a few days before, its heading coordinates still set as then.

"Spock, can you operate this thing?"

To which Spock replied with some alacrity that he could and that now would be a good time to put his boast to the test.

The shuttle broke orbit on the opposite side of the planet to the Enterprise. It seemed inevitable that they should elect to go, and as fast as possible, to the prison planet, to see for themselves what Marten was trying to hide, and informing Scott of this fact - and ignoring McCoy's pleas for them to return home - they made the short trip to the fourth planet which, all unprepared for their coming, opened her dark embrace and swallowed them whole.

On the surface of Charon, events had tumbled over one another

and only the President had kept a clear head. He cursed the man who had been too ready with his knife, for much might have been learned from Juxor under persuasion - he had suspected him of duplicity before this - and his scanners picked up the little shuttlecraft just in time to see it slip into orbit around the fourth planet before Spock began to guide it down.

He was incredulous. The fools! It could only be that they had no idea what was held on that planet, held in a tension so fine, an equilibrium so acute and sensitive that - He shuddered at the thought of what might be unleashed on his people if the balance failed.

If they went, their colleagues would follow - inevitable destruction of the planet, vengeance taken on all the galaxy by monsters beyond the powers of imagination. So, they had gone - but no-one else would follow!

He gave his orders, and for once, his reasons, and there was no shortage of volunteers among the few who knew of the horror.

The crew of the Enterprise came from the far side of Charon, and saw the shuttlecraft sway, saw it rock, turn, heard a strangled voice like Kirk's call for aid - and saw their Captain and First Officer flung in a million pieces across the void as the craft exploded into the long silence.

They had seen it happen, but they could not believe it. These two men, survivors of a thousand fatal situations, had surely survived this, only the latest? It was only when they saw the face of Marten, stricken and ashy, and heard his tragic words, that they began to believe. The Enterprise became a ship of shock and it was long before any words, even of grief, were spoken. Scott and Sulu, professional men both, felt as if some mortal wound had stricken them and they were dying by degrees. Uhura and Chekov clung to each other and wept in silent, ghastly horror. But McCoy - what of the doctor, the mentor, the friend of the friendship of these two - and of them? McCoy sat alone, stony and unreachable, and did not move for hours. When he at last stirred his face was gaunt and white and he was as an old man. He would never smile again.

The fourth planet had not been prepared for their coming, and its face was not as they had seen it before. As they emerged from the shuttle, ready to calm and comfort those wretched people, they were aware of a place that had no *when* to it. It was as if the physical realm was unreal, like curtains of smoke shifting before their eyes - like straining to look at a darkened place when more can be seen by looking away and just catching things as they glance by.

The shimmering unreality of things - yet Kirk was able to put out a hand and touch their craft.

Suddenly they felt the touch of the thing they had felt before, and it was like the cold touch of death. It passed through their minds like wind through an open door on a raw afternoon, and their minds cried out within them. It was like a crazy pain to Kirk, a sort of turning inside out, but to Spock with his acute senses it was agony. They were left as husks after a whirlwind has passed, and dropped, exhausted.

Kirk lifted up a heavy head and looked for Spock - but he had slipped behind these curtains of unbeing. His eyes closed again, for the scouring had drained him, and he was sinking, sinking - into a noise growing louder of young people, children, laughing and shouting and pushing into school...

It was the first day of a year to be spent at the Academy to fill space because there was no room at his proper level and he had to be in school all the time. Finals would come at the end of the year - he couldn't help feeling that he shouldn't be doing finals this late. All were wearing school uniforms from the orphanage - so he didn't feel too out of place - and sat down next to a red-haired boy, explaining that he was only here for a year because there was no room and he had to be in school all the time. They were writing answers to easy questions on their papers and the teacher asked him, "Kirk, when was the Great Fire of London?" and he didn't know! His eyes going everywhere but towards the teacher he mouthed "help me" to his companion but no-one was helping him and time was ticking away. He had to give the right answer and the pressure was building up inside him - *what was the answer?* - desperation was in his mouth like the taste of bile - "1666" whispered the voice behind him and the teacher thought it was him and the terror flowed away like water fast into a drain.

They went out into the recreation ground where there were groups of fir trees leading into a dark forest. As Kirk walked through it, he turned and Spock joined him. They moved between the trees, hands touching, and felt the living love move through them, no need for any words or gestures other than the simple contact. The warmth was like autumn gold sunshine on his upturned face to Kirk and the relaxing air of the pines gave him a heady feeling like breathing musk. Then amidst the silence he realised that he had left his friend behind him - he hadn't known he was walking so quickly, he was so far away! Why had he left? The loneliness was like a trickle of cold running through him and he felt empty and hurt, like an innocent child accused by the teacher of stealing sweets, who knows that protest will only make matters worse. He began to cry and as he did so he knew that they were going to get Spock, who stood on a ridge looking away from him and unaware of the danger. Spock with his acute senses - why couldn't he feel them, see them coming to get him? Kirk began to run, and called "Spock! Spock!" but the sound would not come. He ran but - but why wasn't he moving? All his effort of mind and body went into reaching the Vulcan before they did - he laboured with his lungs and legs and arms until he was on fire, and still getting no nearer. He slowed down, running now so slowly, like moving through water and still he knew that if he could get there, there was a chance of saving Spock from them. But the trees weren't passing him as they should have been - the tears were of bewilderment, frustration, not loneliness now - again, again he had let his friend, the blood in his veins, down - what was the use to Spock of having a friend like him when trying to help was like spending time kicking a mountain that would never move? Bitterness flooded through him as he still ran and knew that he would never get there - not now. But...

...the forest was gone and he was being dragged into a desert, hot, hot with no shade. He fought and did not want to go. But the will framing this was stronger than his own. Clad in black and silent and still as death itself, Spock stood on a rise in the dune, cold eyes regarding the desert. His cloak flapped in the hot breeze, and seeing what he pursued he suddenly strode down the sand, his strength pacing out the distance to the swaying speck on the

horizon. Beneath the firm surface of his resolve he pushed down the voice saying "no" like a blister, and set himself to his task. The sense of unease grew as the dark-robed figure passed swiftly across the burning gold, the sky now tinged with red as the sun sank, and the kneeling man before him cracked his lips into a weak smile and reached out. Spock jerked his arms out, unable to pull them back. He fought to turn away, but one step, another, nearer to the victim - as if he was a puppet, compelled to dance death - his strong, long iron fingers closed around Kirk's neck as he screamed "No! NO!" but the feeble hands scrabbling at his own were useless and as he screamed he heard the *snap* as his hands were his own again, limp and nerveless and the irreversible deed was done. In impotent torment for the action solely his own he howled like a banshee, horror bursting from his wail like blood from a vital wound.

McCoy and Scott beamed down to Charon and Marten's heart was wrung as he saw the terrible grief on their faces. Not that they should feel such grief for the dead - his thoughts were with the living, with the two friends of these men alive on the fourth planet. Better to be dead! The sorrow with which he greeted them was genuine.

They had come, as they must, to examine what fragments remained of the exploded shuttle, and neither wanted the task. But there was little enough left, nothing recognisable as craft or man. Fighting down the terrible impotent grief of the viciously bereaved, they began their work.

Nothing was defence against the bitter thoughts, remembrances that cascaded into their minds. The curious self-confident shyness of Kirk when he first came on board and turned to McCoy like the father lost so long ago - and Spock, his brain, his mind the envy of all - how often had McCoy sparred with him and teased when he only meant affection? That Spock had understood his intention was no comfort to McCoy now. How many lost opportunities to say those things he had always meant to say - opportunities that now would never come? He choked on the thought. His eyes sprang to Scott's, and he saw there his own agony mirrored. The two drew strength from their nearness, and looked to their work again.

Kirk became aware of something more like himself. He was bruised, shaking - shaking with the terror of fear, of losing Spock, of seeing his friend's gentle hands rise to... his mind rejected so much that would not fit, and he had to force himself to sit up, to open his eyes and find some sort of reality.

Spock was lying a little distance away, and Kirk dragged himself up and over to him - so the things *had* got him! But the despair died as Spock began to move. In the other's eyes each saw such things as made words unnecessary, and their minds breathed again.

After a while, Spock broke the silence. "We are in great danger, Jim," he said, his use of the other's given name reassuring himself as well as his friend. "Whatever is here is clearly malevolent. And yet, it has not harmed us, except - to make us feel - uncomfortable." They were pale words, not those he had intended to use, but he felt a sudden and illogical reticence towards speaking of what they had just experienced. His Vulcan sense of time, although jarred, told him that some hours had passed since they had left the

shuttlecraft - and yet, so little seemed to have happened, but he felt physically and emotionally exhausted. But - he could not speak of what he had seen - then the thought came to him, what had Jim seen? If dreams of similar intensity and horror... He made to put out a hand to his friend, but realising that he was speaking, checked the movement.

"... the last one there was a desert and a black-cloaked figure - that came and... it was you Spock and..." he struggled to find the words. What would his friend feel if he told him he had dreamed of his death at Spock's hands? But Spock saw his need and, as always, supplied it.

"Yes, Jim. It was my dream too. I - "

"Yours too? You mean we had the same dreams? We were - in each other's dreams?"

"Apparently, Jim, the entity or entities on this planet must induce these hallucinations - they have a definite reality," and his eyes went to the bruises beginning to appear on Kirk's neck, "and we must - act them out. It has looked into our minds and induced these dreams - and whoever's mind is for the moment stronger, he will draw those he dreams of into his vision so that it becomes their own. I felt no contact with any of the others here. I would surmise that our experience is so foreign that it could not be shared at this primitive level. But you and I..." he trailed off, very unSpock-like, as he saw the chill shudder that fled across Kirk as he recalled what they had seen, and it was not lost on him. Even during the dreams he had, somewhere in his brilliant mind, *known* that this was not true. Kirk did not have that mental stamina, and while Spock knew or thought he knew that nothing here would *kill* them, the thought of Kirk with the wide, pleading eyes of the others filled him with panic.

"Jim," this time not checking the impulse to reach out and touch the other, "until we know more we cannot fight these beings - but we can protect ourselves against their effects. You observed how all consciousness was beaten out of the prisoners - we have to retain our awareness! Let my mind link with yours - I possess an inner strength that you do not - it will strengthen you, help you in the midst of these dreams to know with a small part of you that they are not real."

Kirk did not hesitate, but drew closer in a movement of child-like trust. The Vulcan's hands touched his face and he felt himself again - oh how rarely was it! - being enfolded by that unique, precious consciousness. Each felt once more the depth and quality of love the other held for him - and although now there was no surprise, there was still wonder. Even now, Kirk suddenly looked at his friend for a moment with fresh eyes, marvelling at the fragile thread that had led to this moment, to this, and this... And he thought how one word spoken differently, one step not taken, might have severed that thread - so that he might never have known it existed. But he panicked away from the thought, and his mind felt raw after it.

Spock felt all of this, and a sublime sense of security flowed through him as he knew that Kirk made no attempt to hide such thoughts from him. He filled all the frightened corners of Kirk's mind with compassion, tenderness - and for a few moments, oblivious of *Spock*, of his history, responsibilities, troubles, fears, was at peace.

"Listen, Jim." His voice was rich and full. "These things are not real. They are dreams that are given reality by our belief in them, and though their presence is strong and we cannot overcome them we can control them, Jim - you and I are in control of our own thoughts. We can control them and know that they have no lasting reality, no lasting power." Again he said the words, like a teacher repeating a lesson for a child - and then he touched him with thoughts which were for his friend's mind alone, too precious to be spoken. They moved apart, and Kirk felt iridescent with the sunshine of Spock's being.

They sat without moving for some while - Spock's time sense was growing increasingly awry, and the urgency to discover the ruling force of the planet seemed to have passed. Thus the airs of this world dulled their defences, so subtly that neither was in any way aware of it - and when consciousness began to fade, both, though now with that inner core of Vulcan strength, were unprotected.

Too late, Spock jerked his mind into focus and looked for his friend. Kirk had gone, and with him the ground, the scrub of the planet's surface, and he - he was...

...standing on the bridge of the Enterprise, replaying a scene from - so long ago. He was younger, much younger, surrounded by complete, competent Humans - beings of full, pure blood, but he pushed his cocoon away and knew that his skin must harden if he was to face this world and survive in it. But then the face flashed on the screen, so like his own and horror like the sparkling of shattered glass scattered through him. All those faces turned, and every one was blank, they had no eyes, no features at all and they were all staring at him *blankly* - yes, staring with eyes slowly becoming clear to him, eyes of fear, rejection, hatred. Behind his impassive mask his face was screaming - beneath the surface of his logic, horror, terror, crawled - and the faces of his friends were slowly turned on him too. The kind, benevolent face of the doctor was - no, that one was not of hatred, just fear, incomprehension - *No Spock! This cannot be true* - but his one friend, the heart where his could curl up safe and be at peace - that too, turned against him - that One too? *No!* he cried in his dream in the panic and loneliness. *No!* there must surely be a haven for every speck of life - somewhere, somewhere had to be sacred. And his terror and fear and panic triggered the deeply buried words of the meld that *these things are not real these things are NOT real these things are NOT REAL these things... are... fading* but the spark of his mind had returned and he turned to his dream and knew that he could master it.

I can control. This comes from my own consciousness. I can control. I can! The person he saw as Kirk was coming towards him now, his face empty of all the love Spock had ever seen him show. This was his friend, this was the face of a cared for, caring friend, this hand raised to strike, this man who spat at him in fear, in loathing... From the floor Spock looked up and felt the accumulation of the years of love flood his mind. "You are my friend, Jim." He could think of nothing else and the cruel figure over him laughed. Spock kept talking softly, almost seductively. "We - we are friends, my friend. Do you not remember the things we have seen, people we have shared? Jim, remember evenings on my planet where the heat of the day fades into a beautiful coolness, where flights of silver birds sweep across the colouring sky; remember when there was nothing between us and death but the joining of minds that was only possible because of our love; remember the pain of a friend in danger, the

desperate waiting until he returns - Jim, Jim, remember when I nearly died, remember the amazing appalling hurt that you thought you would never survive; remember all that my caring, my watching, has done for you, all that your caring, your watching, has done for me. Remember Jim, there is nothing in the universe - not even death - that can say this was not so!"

The eyes of the other grew less hard and he bent over the alien as if to strike him, but Spock reached out a hand and Kirk found himself helping him to his feet. With the touch, through Kirk's own fingers, Spock poured, with what desperation he could not have described, all the love and laughter and gentleness of the years he had spent with this precious man, and all that he believed of the years that Kirk had spent with him. The softening in Kirk's eyes began to spread across his face and in a gesture of hurt bewilderment he pulled Spock to him and held him, the physical contact making real something he had thought could now never be. For Kirk too had seen the dream, as though it were his own, and he had seen it differently - but exactly how he told no-one, except perhaps his friend, for Spock knew already and there was no fear there.

The dream fell away and they found themselves standing together as it had left them.

Kirk clung to Spock instinctively, having for the moment no strength of his own. Spock closed his eyes and rocked him and felt, fleetingly, that he could have been content to remain so for ever. But...

"I think that our captors will come soon," he said gently, and Kirk began to gather the pieces of himself together. "We have turned one of their own dreams - visions - upon themselves, and they will not be used to that. I think we shall soon discover these beings' nature - and their displeasure."

He touched Kirk's mind again briefly, knowing the weakness in the Human, knowing - as Kirk knew - the reassurance needed; and both set themselves to wait.

There seemed little more to be done on Charon. Scott had established that the shuttlecraft had been destroyed by an explosion, McCoy that nothing recognisably Human or Vulcan had survived, and both felt a wretched bitterness at the whole business. Scott had recorded the official log entry that closed the careers of his two senior officers, McCoy had counter-recorded and verified it. A sense of listlessness had settled over the Enterprise, and somewhere in his mind McCoy knew that this was exactly what Spock and Jim would not have wanted. It was the best way to let them down, letting the Enterprise go to pieces like this. But he felt too numbed by it all, and although he determined to do something about it tomorrow, he let today drift by in a misty greyness.

Somehow he had wanted to spend one final night on the last planet that his friends had ever seen. He and Scott were again in the room where they had last been before Spock and Jim... He shook his head. *That way madness lies.* But the wash of loneliness was too awful to bear.

"Just sitting here..."

"Aye, I know. If there was an enemy - something out there to be firing phasers at - at least we'd be able to put our anger into something. This doing nothing - "

"And tomorrow we - will leave behind..." McCoy was not used to having to blink back tears, and did it very badly. Scott reached out and touched his shoulder.

"The place, aye. But not them - they're always alive because we'll always remember them - as long as we live. We owe them that. And ourselves."

McCoy nodded, but his voice was too thick to speak. In his grief he saw the long, long years ahead without Jim, without Spock, like a man set adrift from his anchors. Where was he to find the laughing, teasing eyes that had kept him young, the dark, serious ones that had sharpened his wit - and both touching him with the power of their unique and beautiful friendship? He shook his head as if to shake away the horrible reality, as if to close his eyes and open them and see Spock and Jim standing there alive again.

The two men lay down, aware that they should rest their bodies at least, even if there was no quietness for the turmoil in their minds.

They must have slept. For when McCoy awoke, shaking and sweating with fear, it was from the most horrible dream he had ever had.

When he told Marten the following morning, in reply to the other's concern for his wellbeing, the man at once realised what had happened. The two Enterprise men were being absorbed by the horrors of the fourth planet - and because they had not been conditioned, as all prisoners sent there were, the minds of the creatures were beginning to turn outwards. McCoy had felt it first, being the closest to them, but soon others would feel, then others - and then the creatures would come in search of these new emanations and spread and spread... His worst fear had been realised and he knew that now nothing less than the truth would suffice. Heavy-voiced, he took McCoy and Scott to his office - and told them.

As he listened, McCoy ceased to hear what the President was saying. His mind refused to accept these things - so much, in so short a time. Spock, Jim - dead, then alive again, but on a planet not far removed from hell - and suddenly the responsibility of protecting a galaxy against these things - but Jim, his young dear beloved Jim - and his - yes, his beloved Spock too, alive, alive... and in this moment of unbelievable stress, his training mercifully took over; he became cool, efficient, almost Spock-like. Now there was a job to be done, and of sufficient difficulty to necessitate a calmness, a rationality of approach. His mind was shielding him from the seething beneath its surface. Later, when they were safe - later there would be time to cry with the agony, the joy, the - the wonder of it all.

And Spock and Kirk sat, and waited - their shuttle gone, who knew where? - alone, with nothing but their will to survive for company. A darkness overshadowed them, and the air grew chill.

"I think that our captors are here," Spock said.

There was an oppressive dread in the air which hung heavy about them. As they moved instinctively closer, a deeper blackness came into the sky and moved with awful menace across it.

'Winged evil' Juxor had called it, and as it neared they saw that it was less a darkness than the absence of light. There seemed nothing there to be touched - an emptiness drawing everything to itself, feeding on the somethingness around it to enhance its own absence of being. They had never felt such horror - and as the thing passed overhead, there came to their ears, as if from a vast distance, an alien cry, a shriek as of pain, of power and of loathing; a cry which chilled the flesh on their bones and made the surface of their minds crawl. It was a cry of despair, of unimaginable malevolent despair, and both felt cold with the coldness of it.

Then the darkness turned to grey and the thing was gone. Their own awareness flooded them again, and the terrible evil, the awful blackness, faded from their minds. Not so the scream, echoing through their thoughts in wildness and horror.

Kirk's lips were dry. "Spock - how do we fight *that*?"

Spock shook his head, his more acute mind having been more hurt by the creature's passing. "I do not know. But fight it we must, or we are, at best, doomed to spend what is left of our lives here."

McCoy, Scott, Chekov, Uhura - all the people whose skill and wisdom Kirk and Spock had most valued - were seated in the briefing room aboard the Enterprise, together with the President, the Deputy Chief Justice and the senior councillors of the city. Marten was now a different, a broken man, broken because of his fear for his people - and the galaxy's - broken because their trust in him had suddenly snapped like a reed, broken because the full horror of what he had felt necessary over the past years was now forcing itself relentlessly into his mind and he could no longer bar its way.

It was fifty standard years since he had become aware of their neighbours on the fourth planet. A sense of unease began to grow among the people where none had been before; their behaviour became erratic, their unhappiness acute. No life-readings ever showed on their scanners when turned on the skies - nothing of their galaxy was responsible for this. Increasingly the people were tormented with nightmares, plagued in the night with horrors all the more terrible because drawn from their own minds, in the day with fears as to what all this portended, apprehensive about the darkness approaching. Staying awake was no solution - it could not be done.

These were not the real nightmares of the creatures - this was only the result of their unsatiated nearness. In an act of desperation, Marten had gone into a wilderness place, alone and unprotected, and summoned with all the limited telepathic powers that he possessed the attention of whatever might be causing these things. Yes - one creature had come - but of the nature of the 'conversation' that took place he refused to speak, for some things are better left untold. He would only say what he had learned - that these beings were indeed from another galaxy, totally alien to everything and every life-form in this, and their nature was such that they drew sustenance from fear, from very specific raw fear induced in the minds of their - providers. They were a voracious race, and had at last turned upon themselves, tearing the evil

un-hearts out of each other until only a few were left. These few had somehow crossed the barriers that it was not for those of this galaxy to cross - maybe they never even saw them - and had come here, eager and hungry.

Marten had made a bargain with them - that if he would supply them with 'providers', they would remain on the fourth planet. They had no apparent reason to agree - they were quite powerful enough in ways unguessed at to have taken what they wanted from Charon, to have ravaged it and gorged themselves. But they did agree - and the President was faced with the task of keeping the horror fed and his people in ignorance. The idea of a prison planet entered his head quite unbidden - and so the situation had remained until now - until Kirk and Spock and Juxor, in a bid to prevent a cruelty the necessity of which they did not comprehend, had upset this delicate equilibrium. For the creatures rarely troubled their suppliers, growing fat and lazy on the supplies themselves, and prisoners underwent a limited form of conditioning before the journey, blanking immediate memories of their home. The science of his technicians was such that he was able to construct a barrier around the fourth planet; maintained by a series of small satellites, it radiated a jagged frequency of waves calculated to dampen any influences rising from the planet's surface. He had said they were scientific satellites, simply data-gathering devices - and there had been no cause to doubt his word.

But Kirk and Spock had thought, with the clear minds of trained and sensitive men, of all that had gone to make up their past lives - and the creatures were becoming hungry for a change of diet, it seemed. He looked at McCoy, who shuddered slightly and did not reply. They were reaching out again, and would not be prevented twice.

So now they were here, with full knowledge of the situation, unable to make a decision.

Marten spoke hesitatingly. "I think I know what I would do." They all turned to him, and he blinked and continued. "When, where on the fourth planet is different to ours. It is no use searching for them - we can only guess where they landed, and the atmosphere of that planet will do to them what it did to the others we saw - sap everything from them that made them what they were. If you will countenance the suggestion from me - I think we ought to smash the entire planet out of existence - quickly, completely. Yes," as protests began to be voiced, "I know that your friends would be killed. But should these creatures leave that planet - and there is nothing to keep them there - our galaxy will be devastated from end to end - that is not exaggeration! Dr. McCoy has felt something of the effects of the creatures - he knows."

McCoy said, very quietly and very sadly, "Yes, I've felt what these - aliens can do, and if that's a *tenth* of their power - they must be prevented from leaving that planet - at any cost."

There was a long silence after he had spoken, the others taking in not only the meaning of his words, but the fact of who was saying them. For McCoy to sanction the taking of life...

Scott spoke. "That's all very well sir - but might I ask why you've not thought of this before? To feed your people to something like - *that* for so long, and do nothing - it must have occurred to ye before now! Why have ye not done anything?"

Marten shook his head in something like sad bewilderment. "That, I don't know, Mr. Scott. Their influence isn't limited to the fourth planet, as I told you - I speak the truth when I say that it really has just never occurred to me."

"Well," Scott replied, not entirely satisfied with this, "it's clear that these beasts can't be reasoned with - but I'm not going to destroy that planet without at least looking for the Captain and Mr. Spock first. But - another thing's been puzzling me, Mr. President - when we went to inspect your prison, yes, we all felt a little odd about the head, but there seemed to be no danger. What makes ye think they're in such danger now?"

"I still have the power to communicate with the creatures," Marten said bitterly. "On occasions they have had specific - requests to satisfy." The others were glad he gave no further details.

"And..."

"I informed them that for a day they must keep away from the prisoners - they did not keep away entirely, but enough to let them be as normal as they could be after all that... Why do you think the poor devils were so anxious for you to stay? They had been given a sudden, unexplained freedom, then you appeared - even in their condition they realised that the two events were connected. They were my people - people I gave willingly to the clutches of those..." He pushed the thought away in horror, but it would not go.

"Ye are not the first to do so," Scott said softly, "and I doubt ye'll be the last. Ye don't bear the blame alone, sir."

"For fifty years I have been bearing the blame alone, Mr. Scott, but I have seen no alternative. We don't have the weapons to destroy this planet - you do. But even that will be a gamble," he continued, struck by a new thought, "these things can travel through space - they seem to be made of - un-matter is the only way to describe it - an explosion might not even affect them."

The discussion turned to how - whether - Kirk and Spock could be plucked off the surface of the planet before an attempt to destroy it. The unsurmountable problem was that whoever went to rescue them would themselves fall prey to the creatures malevolence, for their coming would almost certainly be prepared for.

Then Marten spoke. He had been coming to terms with an idea that repelled him as nothing else could do. "I can communicate with these creatures - I will tell them that I have to remove your friends because they are - oh, I'll think of a reason - I can cloak my true motives from them for a short while, and if they withdraw while I am on the planet's surface, there is a good chance we will escape. If not - well, you are no worse off."

"You could be killed!"

He shrugged. "There is little enough to live for. No - I will survive if I can - but it is time I paid the price."

A little more discussion, and they separated to sleep and gain some strength for the enterprise. It was a desperate plan by desperate men - to rescue dear friends and prevent the unleashing of the horror on an unsuspecting galaxy - but it was the best they had.

McCoy could not bear even to think of what Jim and Spock were going through down there. His own brief taste had given him some idea of the place - and some idea of what the President was in fact offering them. His form of atonement for all the dead and maddened - well, one man's life might buy back two. He would not face the thought that even the lives of the two most precious to him were not worth the life of the whole galaxy.

On the planet's bleak and hostile surface it was becoming clear to Spock that his friend would not be able to take much more of this.

The air had been filled with the screaming cries, the shadowing of wings not seen, the passing of things not heard but felt - with painful intensity to him, with all his mental shields in place - how did it seem to Jim with no such facility? The protection he had given Kirk earlier was all but gone, cracked under the far greater strength of the inhabitants of this world. No more dreams had come, and Spock had time to be thankful for that before the creatures' next visit began.

But then they came, and his own mind being shielded, they began with Kirk.

They raked his mind from end to end, sifting it, turning it inside out, scouring all its hidden crannies and searing its vulnerable places. Spock again desperately tried to throw some sort of defence around him, building on the tenuous hold he had placed there before - but the power of their afflictors was too strong, and he could hardly reach him. Kirk's mind was as it were swamped in a thick, choking fog, and Spock was blind. Still, he kept trying, projecting his thoughts, constantly asserting that *these things are not real*. He felt his own physical and mental strength waning, and gritted himself. The price of Jim's sanity was far, far higher than any he could possibly pay - and here his will fought and his love fought and his loyalty fought, as he prepared to pay to the uttermost farthing.

For Kirk, it was like being scraped dry. His mind was strong, but against these beings and without Spock's immediate protection, he was defenceless. One by one, all the people he had known were brought before him - Bones, Scotty, Uhura - right through the Enterprise crew, the men of Charon, of Vulcan, Earth - with ghastly realisation he sensed what was happening but was powerless to prevent it. With such information, the creatures would select new victims, new supplies - and feed on them. The fight weakened him still more. He could feel Spock trying to reach him, trying to prise this cloying fog away so that he could surround him with protection, but he could also feel him not succeeding. He strained to pull his mind back into itself, to close the doors to this rape - but suddenly it broke - it had bent so far, so fast, and could take no more. Its entrances sprang open like snapped tendons, and the fury swept in, leaving behind no more than rags, flapping in the wind. Spock, knowing what had happened, could do nothing but hold him and wait for the fiend to turn on him.

And so it was that Marten found them, together in the expectation of death as they had been in life, Spock's arms locked around his friend to keep him from falling. Spock himself was almost unconscious, a man in a daze, who stared blankly at the President

before somewhere deep in his hurt mind registering who stood there, urging him to rise before the next attack. Like a man in a dream he did so, half-carrying, half-dragging Kirk, he was so weak.

Marten urged them on, on to where he had left his shuttle. Time was vital; he had masked his own mind, and knew that the state of the Enterprise men's was such that their reaction to anything was too low to matter, but he could not maintain his mask for ever.

Spock dragged his friend, his dear friend whose mind had been husked nearly to nothingness, feeling nothing himself except that this was dull necessity. His own protection was failing, his mind spilling out into unwanted vulnerability. Somewhere there came the pale thought *Jim - Jim...* but it was no more. Spock, like his Human friend, was dying.

The President knew it, and knew that if he didn't get them out of the planet's baneful influence soon, it would be too late. A few yards from the shuttlecraft, Spock suddenly stood still, his face set solid as rock, and summoned his will for a last battle. The creatures of the fourth planet, sensing another disturbance in their delicate atmosphere, had come to investigate it, and claim him at last.

How Marten pushed, goaded, finally got him into the shuttle he could not have told. What a fragile semblance of safety was this! Here were no barriers to those mind-thieves. But they seemed for the moment content to stay outside, to wait their prey's final disintegration. Marten looked at Kirk, unconscious and grey on the shuttlecraft's floor; and Spock, the flicker of life in his eyes turning hard and cold. To give his action force, he leaned over and touched Spock's face, and projected his presence as strongly as he knew how.

For what seemed a very long time, nothing happened. Then Spock stirred, very slightly, and was still again. Marten tried a second time, a third, draining himself in an effort to win the Vulcan back to life.

To Spock it felt as though after years of walking through grey, someone was shining bright yellow light in his eyes. His grey was dull, comfortable - *what did they want to go and disturb him for?* He irritably pushed the light away. But it came again - *away!* He pushed away a third time, but this time with his hand. *What - where was that movement?* It didn't matter - *again the light!* He growled in fury - *something, beyond the grey?* He was so weary, and all his strength had gone to Jim... His tired will shook into focus things around him, and the grey turned white, blue, gold - hard, metal eyes - man, craft - *SPOCK*. He looked at Marten, and knew what he saw. He had been called back.

"Mr. President," he said slowly, without intelligence. Marten was watching him exhausted, gathering his strength. He nodded, and then reached out a hand again. Spock tried to move away, but was too weak to do more than brush his hand against the other's and then let it fall. Marten's strength flowed through him like water, as Spock's own had through Kirk so short a time before. It coursed over, through him, renewing and refreshing, shoring up the defences, washing the deathly slough away. His mind shook itself like a dog, from head to tail, and when Marten broke the contact, Spock felt awake and alive again, in a dreamy weariness that had nothing of weakness about it.

His brain began to function once more. Marten - clearly a rescue attempt - here some safety in the shuttlecraft. From - ah yes, those mind-scouring creatures - alive but... *JIM!* He dropped to his friend, and took his face in his hands. It was quite cold, quite white, and Spock felt the chill creep through him as he remembered. They had squeezed him like a sponge, and left him dry dust. *"Jim - do not leave me! Not here, so much living to do..."* He felt tentatively for the barrier of his friend's mind, hoping desperately that this emptiness might just be the blankness of a shield. But there was no shield. The emptiness he felt was the emptiness of a mind sucked dry, its remaining drops of essence retreated so deep into shock that only a flicker of life remained. Spock's mind cried in its agony. *"Jim, Jim, come back to me this time again - you, who fill my being, the beloved who shields against the shattering bewilderment of the world - I cannot live without you, I cannot, I cannot..."* In answer, nothing. Jim had gone, and behind the rigid stillness of his Vulcan calm, Spock's world suddenly flew apart.

Marten allowed the few moments, then spoke, urgently. "Spock - you must get off this planet, taking your thoughts of your friends with you - it is imperative that you go - now!" He pushed Spock towards the craft's controls.

Spock gathered his sprawling thoughts. *I cannot, I cannot - but I do not have any choice. I must!* "The creatures are all around," he replied, and could not keep the bitterness of that *must* from his voice. "It will not be possible to leave without attracting their attention, although you are fully shielded, and he... they are too powerful."

The President stepped close to him, and spoke with desperate command in his voice. "Spock - you will do as I say! As soon as I have gone, take the shuttle and get out of here. No - listen! I will go outside - I have enough strength to lead these creatures a dance - for a little while. But only a little - you must get back to the Enterprise and blow this planet out of existence - yes, all those children, those sad people - and these evil, monstrous creatures. Spock, they will devastate the galaxy if you do not, and *that* will be upon your head!" Before Spock could reach out a hand, he had gone. Even through his shield he could feel the other's presence, and suddenly the pressure from the terrible creatures lessened.

Sick at heart, he buried his howling grief and moved the shuttle up gently, out of the influence of the planet. He felt a pulling back, but his stony mind was set, and he steered to his purpose. As he broke orbit and headed home, the tears welled even through his desperate control, and he wept, here where there was no-one to see. Where to go now? Where to find that brittle sense of home - was there always to be this terrible searching? Oh for a more permanent peace, a place of shelter to curl up in and sleep, forget the weariness, the fever and the fret and rest warm and dry while the storm raged outside! But not for him - never for him. With a great weariness he shouldered the burden of being, swallowed the hopelessness and became again - Spock, Vulcan.

And the ship saw him coming, saw her daughter-shuttle bringing back she knew not what, and as she took him to her, she held her breath. But the little craft held life, and the stars might have heard her laugh with relief as she knew him secure.

Spock was not the only one who had wept in recent days, as he saw when he again breathed the thankful air of the Enterprise. To greet him on the hanger deck were technicians - this he expected - councillors from Charon - this he had not - and McCoy. The doctor was quiet, subdued, and as Spock looked at his raw eyes, he knew that much had happened here in his absence. McCoy too read Spock's eyes, and knew that they had seen things better unseen. These two with haggard faces and haunted eyes looked at each other, spoke no words, and moved to their duties. McCoy went to the shuttle, to Kirk, and Spock to the briefing room, to face the new challenge.

He entered, and took in with a glance the remaining councillors - Uhura, Chekov - should they not have been on the bridge? and then Scotty was barring his way. The Scot's face was an enormous smile, and he clasped Spock's hand with an impulsiveness of joy. "Mr. Spock, I'm right glad to see ye!" He suddenly felt that he might have offended the Vulcan dignity, and made to pull away, but was stopped in surprise as he felt Spock grip his own hand.

"The feeling is mutual, Mr. Scott," he said in a low, harsh voice, and turned away. Scott looked behind him, for the Captain, and realising that something must be very wrong, hurriedly took his seat at the table. The others, awed by the Vulcan's tired presence, had looked their relief, but said nothing.

Spock sat and steepled his fingers in an effort to maintain control. "In the absence of the Captain, who was injured and is with Dr. McCoy," - oh if only that was all it was! - "I will assume command and do what has to be done. Please begin by telling me what has happened in my absence. Briefly - time is of the essence." Any queries were stillborn, and Scott concisely and in clipped manner told Spock what he needed to know.

So, now he was in possession of all the information - but to what outcome did it tend? All his being arrived at the logical conclusion that to destroy these creatures in their entirety, to extinguish them forever, was absolutely necessary. And all his being revolted against such mass slaughter - at his command. In his hands lay the fate of the species - and of the galaxy's millions. And what of the few on the planet's surface - those prisoners whose last years of torment 'feeding' these beings was to be crowned by this? *You are becoming emotional.*

He desperately wished that McCoy was here with him. That irascible, reliable presence would have been invaluable. But he was tending the flicker of being that was Jim Kirk, and Spock must face this decision alone. The galaxy's peoples - possibly every one of them - against a unique species, from beyond the borders of experience, every one of them - he shuddered inside as he thought what that really meant.

His conscience - peace of mind - against horrible dying for countless planets, most of which he had never heard of and never would.

Peace of mind - what peace of mind would he ever have, Kirk lost to him? His spirit cried out but the cry died on the wind. There was no answer - and he knew that losing Kirk, he would reach out in

the loneliness and dark, and call for his friend, and there would be no reply.

Time! He jerked his erratic mind back - he did not know how long Marten could occupy the creatures, but he could not wait forever. He looked at the faces around him quietly watching, and saw how he must appear to them - reliable logical Spock, always to be trusted to carry the burden and not fall, to take the wound and not flinch - to make the decision and not falter.

Why - oh why me? But he was the one with whom their future lay - and he and his Captain had not failed them yet. But his Captain was not here...

He decisively squared his shoulders. Jim was in his memory, in his heart - he was here! And there was no other way - God help him, there was no other way. With sudden, horrible irony he realised that this was not so far removed from the decision that Marten had had to face, fifty years ago.

"Mr. Scott, divert all available power to the phasers and come to the bridge. Gentlemen..." indicating that the others should follow him as he left the room.

As he walked to the bridge, he was without exception greeted by spontaneous smiles on the faces of those he passed. The bridge was alive with them, and as he sat in the onerous command chair, he was overwhelmingly aware of their gladness, of their respect and - yes, their affection for him. It occurred to him that even without Jim, there was a home for him here.

"Mr. Sulu, phasers at maximum power, prepare to train on given coordinates."

"Phasers standing by sir."

"Commence scanning planet surface."

"Scanning sir," came Chekov's reply. "No readings yet, Mr. Spock."

"There will be, Ensign." He depressed a control on the chair. "All personnel, this is Commander Spock. We are about to remove a protective screen around the fourth planet. The effects may be unpleasant, but they will not be harmful." He turned to the Deputy Chief Justice, standing behind him. "Sir, if you will avail yourself of Miss Uhura's communications facilities, and give the necessary orders... Mr. Chekov, as soon as the screen is removed, scan for readings in the vicinity of the President's last known position. When you have your coordinates, Mr. Sulu will lock into them and fire in a repeat pattern with that position as the centre. You may manoeuvre and fire at will Mr. Sulu, and do not cease until the entire planet's surface has been covered."

"Aye, sir." Oh implacable, imperturbable Spock, unhesitant even in the face of a decision such as this! *Oh mourning, wretched man, weeping even for the destruction of creatures that had killed his friend, but were so unique!* He sat quietly, and his outward calm made itself felt in the efficiency and confidence of the men around him.

The order to Charon was given. A few moments later, the man turned and said. "The protective screen is down, Mr. Spock."

He need not have said it. The effect of its removal was indeed most unpleasant, and Spock briefly marvelled at the ingenuity of those who had designed and placed it there. They all felt a sudden irrational anxiety, a debilitating lethargy, a crazy irritability, and a profound sense of something very nasty creeping up behind.

Then the momentum of events took over. Chekov found his objective, called the coordinates in a rush to Sulu, who locked his phasers into the necessary pattern and began firing. Spock would rather have forgotten those minutes, no-one speaking or moving, the noise of the Enterprise's phasers sounding again and again and again... He had shielded his mind to a certain extent from the effects of the creatures, but still felt very, very weary - and he had had no chance to recover from his exposure to them on the planet's surface. He was murdering thousands of innocents below, extinguishing a unique life-form, the most precious being in the galaxy was dying somewhere below him - something in him stretched taut, taut to breaking as he consciously tried to relax and found that he could not. Inside him all was being twisted around itself, pulled until it must tear, snap - spill - he held himself somehow, knowing that at one crack in him, everything would fall apart.

And suddenly, like a door slamming shut, it was over. The crew, who had been holding themselves rigid against the evil, collapsed like puppets whose strings had been cut. To Spock, sitting in the chair, it was as though someone had kicked his entrails out. He felt empty, abandoned and alone, and would have seen little cause to continue the effort of existence if he had been offered death at that moment. Slowly, the murmur of the ship returned, and he resigned himself to life. He had escaped - or been caught - again.

And then, into the hiatus left by the withdrawal of the creatures' passing and the silence of the phasers, came a shattering, shattering... thing. It swept through the Enterprise in a blast of fury that was at once there - and then gone. A sudden blinding flash of white - but there was nothing to see. A fury of violent wind - but nothing stirred. And an evil, eerie wail, keening into every fibre of being - but there was no sound. And as the creature fled across the face of the galaxy, and the world became real once more, Spock knew with horror that one of these creatures was still alive, and let loose at last. But the evil faded, and he could only hope that it would return to its own galaxy, or die in the attempt.

"Should we pursue it sir? Chekov asked in a shaking voice, too scared to think and too scared to remain silent.

"Pursue what?" Spock replied. "That creature is a thing of no substance, able to travel through space with no protection, invisible to any sensors. It is a life-form totally alien to this galaxy and to all that we comprehend life to be. We have met similar creatures before, but I never encountered one that does not register on any sensors, or with such devastating power."

"And I don't think I ever want to encounter one again," Scott said feelingly.

"Nor do I." In the silence, they were all remembering that Spock had 'encountered' these beings at much closer quarters than they had.

Spock stood. He was no longer needed here. The crisis was over, and all his weariness and desperation and fear for his friend flooded back. He must hold on, just for a few more moments! "Mr.

Scott, please take over. I shall be in sickbay if I am required." He left the bridge like a man walking to his grave.

In the sickbay, McCoy had put Kirk on a small bed in a side room, alone. As he made him comfortable under the thin covers, he had the unpleasant feeling that this was a laying-out, despite the faint heart-beat that he had to keep feeling to reassure himself it was still there. But of the man's consciousness, there was no sign. Even during that last brief visitation, when McCoy's mind had howled in protest, Kirk's body had done no more than stiffen very slightly.

The doctor turned as he heard the doors open, then close behind the calm, impassive, haggard Vulcan. He quickly crossed to them and put the lock in place, and turning again was shocked to see the change that the sense of security had bred in Spock. His shoulders sagged and his eyes were shadowed with pain, his hands trembling slightly with the awful expectations of what McCoy might be about to tell him.

"Jim?"

He moved towards the still, still man and took one of the cold hands between his. His head bowed, he did not - could not - check the shaking. *Jim, how can I lose you at last after all - after all? My friend, t'hy'la - my beloved dearest friend - help me now - do not leave me alone to face all those empty years without you! Something, something there must be I can do for all the years - at the last can I do nothing, Jim? - come back, come back, life is hollow without you - I cannot go through life alone, alone...*

As if to answer something of his need, he felt McCoy's hand rest on his shoulder, felt the strength that, for once, flowed into and not out of him. His shaking stilled slightly.

No, he was not alone. There could be no substitute for this precious, dying man, but there was the other, whose love for Spock was as strong, whose friendship of value without price. Not alone, but lonely. And he realised that he was not the only one losing a friend.

"Doctor." He turned slightly, and his wretched face half-looked at the doctor's, seeing now the grief that marked this face too.

"I can't reach him, Spock," McCoy spoke with a quiet despair he had never heard. "His mind is buried somewhere in there - but it's too deep for me to find it. It's as though he's gone into a dark corner to hide, and is too... frightened to come out." Spock nodded. But McCoy began to speak more urgently. "Spock - he *is* still alive - just. Couldn't you try to reach him, stir his mind to some sort of... self-heal? If you can't do it, then nothing can be done!"

Spock looked at him blankly as the thought picked its way through his mind. He had not even considered... McCoy saw that Spock's mind was dazed, dazed with weariness and grief, and shook his friend gently. "Spock - please - try it. I can't do anything."

"But - to enter the secret place of an unconscious mind..."

"That's not an unconscious mind, Spock, that's Jim Kirk, and he's dying! You know what he means to both of us - if you can't bear

to think of life without him, then no more can I."

Spock looked into the tired, blue eyes and briefly moved a hand to touch the other's. How dare he have underestimated this man's love - either for himself or for the one who lay here dying.

"I'm sorry Bones," he said quietly. "I am confused."

McCoy put his other hand on Spock's arm - the nearest he would ever come to hugging this austere, vulnerable man. "I know Spock - but please try."

Spock touched his hands softly to the Captain's empty face, and his own blanked out as he moved through layer after layer of his friend's mind, and found - nothing, or what had been, shocked into a paralysing numbness that he could not awaken. Suddenly he sensed the tiny quiver of life, far far away, and moving towards it called it softly - *Jim, Jim, come back! It's Spock, your friend, your t'hy'la - Jim!* The quiver was too terrified to answer, but shrank back into its corner and hid from him.

Spock removed his hands and looked at McCoy with eyes again full. "I cannot reach him - he is too terrified, too deeply shocked, but," he clenched his fists as the stupid futility of it all came upon him, "he is *alive* and you and I can do nothing." He was furious now. "Doctor, you and I are his dearest friends and between us we have more knowledge than any other men on this ship - and we can do nothing!" His disgust was tangible, and McCoy felt too helpless to disagree. They stood, side by side, and waited for their friend to die.

"Spock," McCoy broke the horrible silence, "do you want to try again?"

Never refuse - this time might be the one. "I will try, Doctor."

"Project that you're in trouble. Tell him that you need his help - desperately, that you'll die without it. Nothing is stronger than the bond between the two of you - it's the only chance left now!"

"And what if he should absorb the message and be unable to respond? If he is at peace now - do we have the right to torment his last few hours? He has been through, through..."

"Spock, he has the right to live! And don't we have the right to try and get him back?"

Spock sighed, and again moved to the bed. With all the skill and strength in him, he projected his message - of danger, of fear, of himself dying without the aid of his friend, a desperate pleading for help - and the sure, unshakable knowledge that it would come. He felt the quiver turn its horrified eyes on him. *Please Jim - please come. I know you will come, I will die if you do not come, I need your help, Jim. Jim, there is not much time!*

The spark of life buried deep within Kirk stirred. It was like a child, whirled around by savage witches in a nightmare wood, terrified and screaming, hiding its head in its arms and kicking blindly at all who came near - but it had received a summons it could not refuse, and love began to make it brave and strong again. And so it moved, trembled, and flowed out of its hiding place, spreading

itself once more, dissipating itself into all the levels of the mind, waking the sleeping consciousness that was the life of James Kirk. Warmth and fire, and a sense of extreme urgency, and the blood began to course along his veins as it had before.

Spock and McCoy did not know how long they stood, waiting as if at the edge of the world. Nothing moved - and suddenly into the stillness came the motion of Kirk's lips.

"Spock!"

McCoy gripped Spock's arm, his eyes saying all that the sudden thickness in his throat prevented him from putting into words. Spock took his Captain's hand, and both waited quietly for the completion of the healing.

As Kirk slowly opened his eyes, the world for McCoy and Spock seemed to stop - in relief or in dread. Slowly, slowly Kirk took in the presence of his two friends, and started to half-smile, very weakly, very slightly. The world began to move again.

"Spock" - again mouthed, but no sound.

"I am here, Jim - and quite safe. And so - so are you." Kirk reached up in wonder at the tears covering the Vulcan's face. Spock smiled gently, and some realisation and memory dawned upon his friend. The two were for the moment, content.

McCoy turned softly to go, knowing that they had something precious which he could not share. "Doctor," Spock called quietly. "Please - we are friends, we three, and should be together now." And McCoy came and took his friends' hands, and they remained so, in the peace and unity that were still unshakably theirs.

McCoy confined Spock to sickbay for four days; Kirk for more than a week. Both had suffered more than he could tell - or more than he cared to know, and he knew that time alone would be of value to them. They spent most of it in quiet conversation, discussing topics of interest to both - but never referred, in his hearing, to the time they had spent on the fourth planet. McCoy spoke of it only once, and at the haunted look which came into Kirk's eyes, never did again.

Kirk slowly pieced himself together, shook his battered mind into some sort of order. He slept long hours, sleep being the natural balm he needed; but the presence of his two friends did more than anything else to strengthen him. And especially of Spock - this precious, irreplaceable friend who had kept him alive on the planet's surface and called him back from the threshold of death here. But all those days blurred into a haze when he looked back on them - his mind shied away from memories that would strip wounds barely scarred-over, too raw to be thought of. He never fully remembered it all - but enough, oh more than enough to feel his love for his friend increase a hundred-fold - if there was room for such an increase in a place already so full.

Some weeks later Kirk and Spock, recovered and back on duty on the bridge, watched as fresh emissaries from the Federation left for Charon. The Enterprise had been offered the opportunity to ferry

them herself, which Kirk had delicately, firmly, refused. Even the mention of the planet and its prisoners still turned his stomach - and Spock had whole-heartedly seconded his Captain's decision.

Kirk stood, and felt the warmth of his friend standing close behind him. He knew, acutely, that were it not for Spock, all feeling and all knowing in him would have been over on that world to which the ambassadors were going. And what of that final, ghastly creature? Was there really such an entity roaming the galaxy, *being* with its *unbeing*? He shook his head slightly - no, no, that was not a line of thought he wished to pursue.

But in the rec room, Spock voiced other worries. "There is much that I fail to understand about these creatures and their incursion into Charon's system. Their colonisation of an uninhabited planet with an inhabited one so near was logical - to have settled Charon itself would have destroyed its people and thus their food supply - but they agreed with Marten to remain there, when they had no interest in doing so. When we heard of their existence, we did not hesitate in going directly to the planet, just the two of us, when it would clearly have been wiser - from the information we then possessed - to return to the Enterprise and organise a landing party. You say Marten told you that the creatures' influence spread beyond the fourth planet - but I would have thought that such an obvious course of action would have occurred to one of us, at least. We landed at coordinates identical with those we had used the day before - yet we found no prisoners. And although our shuttle... disappeared - Marten found us with no difficulty, and his did not. The creatures must have broken his defences - yet they made no attempt to attack, and although I would have expected them to be immune to our phasers, we destroyed them."

"Almost."

"Almost. Jim, there is too much that does not fit our understanding of the situation. Random factors are not that favourable."

"What are you saying Spock?"

"Merely sir, that it seems there was another factor in operation - one of which we have no knowledge, but which clearly knows us."

"Or who."

"You mean that something was - *stage-managing* it all? Spock, you're joking!" McCoy was shocked that such suffering should have been deliberately caused...

"No, Doctor, on both counts. The unknown factor is far more sophisticated than that. And if it exists, it is probably still at large."

"And it's not just our guardian angel?"

"No, Jim, it is not. I am disturbed by these events." He paused and Kirk, not liking at all the turn things were taking, interrupted.

"Spock - I know we've just turned down the offer to take the new ambassadors there, but - would you like to return? Do you want to go and see the planet again - to get some of this straight in your mind?"

"Jim, neither you nor Spock could reasonably stand being faced with that place again so soon! You went through hell down there - surely not even Spock's curiosity could take him back!"

Spock nodded. "This is one of those few occasions on which we are in agreement, Doctor." He had chosen his words well. Kirk relaxed - if Spock was back to sparring with McCoy, he couldn't be *that* worried. "I am curious to solve the mystery, but I have a strange and illogical antipathy to the vicinity of Charon. It is nothing I can explain. Call it instinct, Doctor - my *instinct* tells me that the greater distance we put between ourselves and Charon, the better." McCoy couldn't have agreed more. "But Jim," in an effort to lighten his friend's mood, "we shall not finish our game of chess if we do not begin now."

Kirk smiled and the two became absorbed in the game, leaving McCoy to muse alone.

It was disconcerting how uncomfortable they all felt because they hadn't been able to tidy the Charon business up into neat compartments. Life wasn't like that - shouldn't they rather be surprised that they were so frequently able to tie up all the loose ends of whatever situation they encountered? But they were rarely as untidy as this one, and he had the nasty feeling that one day he'd walk round a corner and find a loose end lying there, waiting. Or more likely, Spock would. He watched him, concentrating on the game. He was worried at Spock's worry, distressed that he could offer no solution, logical or otherwise, to the questions bothering the Vulcan. He always worried about Spock, and this was just one more worry, but it was a specific one, one that might catch up with him in the end...

He came out of his reverie to find Spock's eyes intently on him as Kirk considered his next move. The doctor looked levelly at his friend, who gave him one of those rare almost-smiles he usually reserved for Kirk. McCoy swallowed.

"You'd better concentrate on the game Spock, or you'll lose," he said gruffly.

Spock's eyebrow rose in superbly sceptical elegance, and he turned back to the game and played.

And won.



IN FRIENDSHIP'S NAME

by

Brenda Kelsey

(Sequel to 'Hand of Friendship', Log Entries 70.)

It was the quietness of the argument which first attracted his attention, the way that the two men were keeping their voices down, being discrete, pretending to be sharing a friendly meal.

McCoy and Spock trying to argue and avoid attention?

More used to the intense verbal pyrotechnics of their normal battle, this change to the way of things disturbed him enough to make him watch the interesting debate which was being conducted in fierce but inaudible whispers with growing amusement which slowly changed to concern.

The two did seem to be disagreeing.

While there was nothing new in that it seemed that on this occasion Spock was trying to persuade McCoy to agree to something, and McCoy was refusing. Now that definitely was a first!

Finally McCoy left, having uttered what seemed to be a final and very emphatic 'No'. Spock continued to sit and sip his drink. Only a confirmed Spock-watcher would have noted his dejection, and Montgomery Scott had been a member of that select band of people for some time.

He gathered his newly arrived technical journals together and swapped tables, ditching his plans for a quiet night of reading and imbibing without hesitation.

"What were the two of ye arguing about this time?"

One thing about trying to pry information from Spock that he had learned very quickly was not to resort to subtlety, at least not immediately. The ship's Science Officer was notoriously close-mouthed about anything that was what he considered to be of a private nature.

The head opposite him remained bowed over the cup on the table. "Arguing?" asked a neutral voice politely.

"I do have a functional brain in the space between ma ears, and contrary tae the popular belief, it does not require me tae be inside the engine room for it tae work normally."

"I never thought that that was the case."

"Thanks. So, what were ye arguing about?"

"I do not argue."

"There are a variety of words that I could use tae announce my

opinion of that last statement, but it would be a waste of ma breath as ye'd probably no' understand any of them. I saw ye and McCoy. The pair of ye were arguing." The statement was definite, defying Spock to deny the truth of it.

"Yes, we were." When the softly spoken agreement was made at last he could barely hear it.

"Is there anything I can do tae help ye?"

Spock finally looked up at him and Scott's eyes narrowed as he spotted the nearly healed remnants of a black eye.

"Who did that tae ye?" he asked sharply.

"The Captain is fully aware of all the circumstances. The matter has been dealt with to his satisfaction."

"But not to mine." He leaned forward and hissed, "Who did it? Who dared tae hit ye?"

"Please, Mr. Scott. Lower your voice." He looked around, then quickly away as some junior officers entered in a burst of sound. "You will excuse me."

"Not a snowflake's chance in Hades. I want some answers from ye."

The junior officers saw nothing unusual in Scott and Spock leaving the rec room together, and gratefully occupied the vacant table. Scott stuck close to Spock, and finally followed him into his quarters, stopping just inside the door.

"Mr. Scott."

"I'm not leaving until I get some answers. Or I could always go and ask the Captain about this."

His threat did not have the effect that he thought it might, but it did serve to start Spock talking.

"I give you my word that the Captain does know about my injury and the full circumstances in which I received it. He will tell you no more than that."

"Has anyone seen tae it?"

"Affirmative. Dr. McCoy has been treating my injury."

"Is that why ye've been hiding away in here for the past week? So the crew wouldn't see that?"

"Yes."

"Who did it?"

"That is not important."

"Oh yes it is. Somebody hit ye and I want tae know who on this ship would dare tae do that." A sudden flash of insight made him ask, "Was it Ferris?"

"No!"

Spock's immediate denial convinced Scott. It also made him realise that if Kirk did know about the attack then there was little he could do about it. He knew that the stone-wall tactics normally employed by Jim Kirk and Spock to conceal restricted information would defeat him, and acknowledging that he changed his line of questioning, asking, "Was that what ye and Bones were arguing about?"

"No." And then, because he had not yet conquered his compulsion to tell the absolute truth, "Not precisely."

"Tell me about it. I may be able tae help, and even if I canna I promise not tae repeat what ye say tae anyone."

Spock swallowed hard, another sign to any Spock-watcher that he was under severe strain. Scott decided to wait him out, and leaning back against the bulkhead folded his arms and gazed around the sparsely furnished room with undisguised interest. He had been in Spock's quarters before, to look after the occasional fault, but then he had felt himself to be 'on his honour' and had not pried. Now he gave his curiosity full rein while waiting for Spock to talk to him. He knew that Spock would; the intensely private Vulcan had not demanded that he leave.

Finally Spock said, "Will you sit down?"

"Certainly." Scott slipped into the indicated seat, the table a defensive barrier between them as the table had been in the rec room.

"I do not have refreshments to offer you."

"Well, you dinna do that much entertaining here, do ye?" Which sounded reasonable to Scott. He had to restrain himself from offering to fetch some. He didn't put it beyond Spock to refuse him re-entry. Now that he was in he was going to make the most of his opportunity. Spock retreated into silence again.

"Is it so difficult for ye?"

Spock bowed his head again. "It concerns an invasion of privacy."

"Yours?"

"No, Dr. McCoy's privacy."

Scott smiled fondly at the top of Spock's head. That explained a great deal. Spock wasn't trying to pluck up courage to speak of his own problems - and Scott was certain that he had got problems - he was trying to sort out one of McCoy's.

"I've known Bones for a good long time now. I'd like tae help him if I can."

"McCoy has refused me permission to interfere."

"Telling me isna interfering. It isn't, truly. And besides, he hasn't refused me permission tae interfere with his problem, has he?"

The bowed head came up again, and startled brown eyes gazed at him in astonishment before the shutters began to fall.

"It's called being sneaky, Spock, and it is logical. We both want tae help a friend, so where's the harm?"

The shutters stopped halfway as Spock considered his words; then, decision made, he began talking.

"It concerns Dr. McCoy's daughter."

"Joanna? A lovely wee lassie. What's wrong with her?"

"You have met her?"

"Aye, when Bones was patching me up after Burns Night. Atlanta was a stupid place tae try and celebrate, but I didna have the time tae get back home tae Scotland."

"Burns Night?"

"It's like Hogmanay wi' hair on, and ye are no going tae side-track me away from finding out what it was that I came here tae find out about."

"Dr. McCoy is concerned. He has not received any communications from his daughter since he was assigned to the Enterprise."

"I take it that he does send tae her?"

"He has been granted the normal privileges of a parent by Starfleet, free transmission of communication every 28 days. He sends to her more frequently."

"And she gets the same?"

"I checked the reciprocal agreements most carefully. It seems that she is no longer using her right of reply. The lack of contact is beginning to affect Dr. McCoy."

"Why doesna he ask the Personnel branch tae find out why she isna writing any more?"

The long slender fingers wove themselves into a tight ball. "He says that if there was anything wrong Starfleet would have informed him of it." Spock swallowed hard again. "He says that it is her decision and he isn't going to force her to write to him if she does not wish to."

"Och, that's plain daft!" Noting the slight flicker of expression a small devil prompted him to ask, "Did you tell him so?"

"I did not phrase it in precisely the same way." The shutters came down all the way and Spock withdrew behind them.

Scott eyed the injury on Spock's face. He considered asking more questions, but fortunately managed to ignore that same small devil, saying instead, "It seems we're caught between a rock and a hard place."

Spock conveyed puzzlement at Scott's cryptic sentence.

"What I mean is, that if we do contact Personnel he's going tae know that we did it and be hopping mad; and if we dinna we're going tae have tae put up with an even grumpier, grouchier Bones making a confounded nuisance of himsel' about the ship."

"We?" An eyebrow raised itself in an elegant arch.

Scott thought that it looked a little lonely without its mirror image companion echoing it.

"A problem shared, Mr. Spock. I know, so now I share the responsibility. There may not be anything we can do now, but there may well be an opportunity in the future to solve this problem, and our chances of spotting it have improved 100% now that two of us know. I just wish that he wasnae sae stubborn."

"It does seem to be a facet of personality shared by most of the senior officers of this ship."

Scott laughed, quietly in deference to Spock's sensitive ears. "Only most? In your considered opinion, Mr. Spock, which of this motley crew would ye say wasnae stubborn?"

When Scott left three hours later, still stone cold sober, he felt quite elated enough not to bother to try and hide his wide grin. The few crew that he passed as he went back to his own quarters to grab some hours sleep assumed that he'd been 'entertained', and so he had. Spock had proved to be a diffident, indeed almost a shy host, but had seemed to thaw slightly under Scott's persistent pressure, as if he needed reassuring that Scott really did want to talk to him before he could commit himself to a conversation.

A surprise to the engineer had been that Spock had been conversant enough with the Enterprise engineering systems to follow and - what was far more interesting from Scott's point of view - comment coherently on Scott's more technical observations. It shouldn't have surprised him really. If he had considered the habits of the man that he was talking to he would have realised that Spock spent much of his 'free' time studying and working. What other ship's activities, beside the occasional chess game, could he involve himself in?

The evening had gone too fast for Scott, and for that, and quite a few more complex reasons, he decided that it wouldn't be the last one he spent in that way - provided that he could think up a foolproof way of cornering the Vulcan without having to invade the sanctuary of his quarters to do it.

Two months later a highly disgusted Scott received orders to go to Earth and take part in a seminar on the design of starship engines. He steamed into Kirk's quarters without first requesting permission to enter, to find a large measure of his favourite drink waiting for him on Kirk's desk, and his Captain venting his feelings at a fortuitously distant Commadore.

"Why do you want Scott to be there?"

"Because he is primarily responsible for the current level of starship engine design." The reply was patient and in a tone of voice that would normally be reserved for explaining something to someone who the speaker thought was being wilfully stupid.

"It's about time someone noticed that."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I've seen the design specs, and while I can't interpret half the circuits, I can read the designer's name in the appropriate boxes. Scott's name does not appear anywhere on those specs, and that despite his being responsible for nine-tenths of the upgrades." Kirk smiled innocently at the screen. "I have reported this matter before."

"Yes. Ah. Your report was received. The omission was an oversight on the part of the office who duplicate the information for transmission."

"In that case I trust that the people responsible for the 'oversight' have been made fully aware of their deficiency, and that new specs will be distributed, all correctly bearing Scott's name?"

Scott held his breath. Anyone who had dealt with Kirk before knew that he was most dangerous when he was wearing his 'sweetness and light' face. He wondered what his Captain was up to, and wondered if he should just get out while he could. A gesture from Kirk, made out of sight of the screen pick-up, decided things for him. He sat down and started drinking.

"The matter is in hand."

"Then I will expect that Enterprise will receive the new set in the very near future."

"It will."

"As will all the other ships in Starfleet that have benefitted from the modifications, and naturally the Central Archives will be updated, and credit for the designs attached to Mr. Scott's career record."

From the Commodore's expression it looked as if he was eating raw lemons. "Naturally," was the only thing that he trusted himself to say.

"Very well. In that case I have no objection to Mr. Scott attending this seminar, which will of course be informed of his manifold talents in the field of engine design. I'll expect him back aboard this ship in 52 standard days. Oh, and Commodore..." Kirk smiled sweetly, "If he isn't, I'll be bringing Enterprise in to Earth to collect him."

"You'd leave your assigned patrol area?" The Commodore was scandalised by the threat.

"Absolutely correct. This is a very old trick, and it's been pulled on active service crews a damned sight too often. Key personnel seconded for a few days, or maybe months. Then the secondment is extended and transport suddenly becomes difficult to arrange, and the ship never gets the experienced people that it needs back. Well, it's not going to happen this time. Mr. Scott is *my* Chief Engineer, and he's damned well going to *stay* my Chief Engineer until he decides he's had enough of me demanding Warp 10 so that I can go and clear up yet another mess. Fifty two days, and not a second more. Kirk out." He sighed and leaned back in the chair.

"If ye go on talking tae senior officers like that ye'll find yersel' being court martialled."

"How can you be court martialled for speaking the truth?"

Besides, I did mean every word of it. Scotty, I know that you don't particularly enjoy going to this sort of event, but this one will mean that you'll finally get the recognition that you truly deserve."

"That sort of thing doesn't bother me."

"Well, it does bother me. Drink your drink."

"Thanks. I'm sorry that I came charging in here."

"Forget it."

"When do I leave?"

"Er... three hours time."

"You're joking!"

"No, I'm not. Enterprise is to rendezvous with an inbound Scout, the Waverly, which is going to give you a ride all the way in to Earth."

"This must have been set up months ago."

"That's what I told the Commodore. He said that it was an 'inter-departmental slip'. When you go to Earth you'll be taking with you a tape of the discussion that I've just had and a very strongly worded complaint from me to the Chief of Operations. That Commodore is going to be kicked in the butt by someone with a very large boot, and he's the best one that I can think of for the job."

"I'm volunteering."

"No thanks. I want you back on board, not court martialled and grounded."

Scott saw the shudder, and wondered at the cause, but Kirk gave him no chance to inquire.

"Can you be ready to leave in 3 hours and... ummm... 6 minutes?"

"If I have to be."

"Good. I'm going to announce it to the crew so that any inbound mail can be collected and sent using the Waverly."

"Why do we call it 'mail'?" asked Scott, and downed his drink.

"Guess it's shorter and easier to say than 'personal messages, official communications, and parcels'."

"You're right."

"I'll be down in the transporter room to see you go. Make sure that you enjoy yourself."

"Aye."

Scott left as the announcement of his impending departure started to echo through the ship. Two hours and forty minutes of frantic activity later he was heading into his own quarters to pack when a quiet voice said,

"Mr. Scott."

Scott said, "Not now, laddie. I dinna have the time," and brushed past the person. He was halfway to the bathroom, stripping off his uniform top, when he realised that the speaker had been Spock. Cursing, he reversed course and managed to catch Spock before he reached the lift.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Spock. I didna realise it was you."

"It does not matter."

"Oh yes it does. Look, I've got 21 minutes left tae get tae the transporter room. Come in and talk tae me while I get changed and packed."

"Mr. Scott..."

"Ye're wasting ma time," warned Scott.

Spock nodded his consent and allowed himself to be shepherded inside Scott's quarters.

"What did ye want tae speak tae me about?"

Spock balanced the lack of time against the peculiarity of the request that he was about to make and decided on bluntness. "You remember the conversation we had concerning Dr. McCoy?"

That stopped Scott's darts about his quarters. "I do."

"Your visit to Earth may be able to solve the problem central to that discussion."

"How?"

Spock placed a small, very anonymous parcel on the desk. "That is Dr. McCoy's present to his daughter on the occasion of her fourteenth birthday. I removed it from the mail container."

"Why?"

"So that I could ask you to attend to its delivery personally."

Scott exploded at him. "I will do no such thing! That's not an invasion of privacy - that's a diabolical liberty!"

Spock retreated immediately, the small parcel again concealed in his hand. He was again aware of how little he understood the emotions of his companions, and sought to apologise for breaking another Human custom.

"I did not realise that I was transgressing. Please accept my apologies for asking this of you. I would not have done so if I had known that I was contravening a Human convention. I will return this to the mail container. You have my word that I shall not speak of this matter again."

"Now hold on a minute..."

"You have 16.3 minutes in which to complete your packing. I will not detain you further." Spock turned almost blindly towards the door - and found that Scott was barring his way.

"Just let me get this straight. You want me to deliver that to Joanna for her birthday."

"That is what I had intended to ask of you."

"And Bones doesn't know?"

"That is correct. Forgive me. I had not comprehended the enormity of my offence in suggesting this. Birthdays are not celebrated on Vulcan, and the etiquette involved in a Human birthday is unknown to me."

"You haven't offended me or anyone else." *Yet. Keep it up and you'll turn into an expert in it.* "You just gave me a bit of a shock, that's all. It's a good idea, and I'll do it."

"There is no need."

Scott held out his hand. "The package, please, and Joanna's address and birthday date. After all, what else are friends for?"

Which is how he ended up cooling his heels in the office of the Principal of the residential school where Joanna was staying while her mother was visiting her new husband's relatives on a selection of colony worlds. His neck burned again as he recalled the details of the interview with the man whose suspicions of his motives were all too obvious. He had finally agreed to let Scott see Joanna. And he'd got himself into this mess because he couldn't bear to be responsible for the carefully hidden, almost stricken look that had appeared in Spock's eyes when he had yelled at him.

Lost in thought, he did not hear anyone enter. The sound of flesh on material alerted him to the fact that he was no longer alone. A girl who was very like McCoy in features stood watching him, a stubborn, angry, set look on her face.

"You're from the Enterprise?"

Scott smiled warmly. "Aye, that's right."

"I suppose my father sent you."

Scott's smile disappeared. "No. Actually, it was Mr. Spock."

"The Vulcan? Why did he...? Is my father hurt? Is he all right?" Concern showed on her face and in her voice.

He hastened to reassure her. "The last time I saw your father, which was 19 days ago, he was perfectly well."

The girl turned away. "Then why are you here? Why did Mr. Spock send you here?"

"He wanted tae find out why you don't write tae your father."

The girl laughed, a very bitter sound. "That's rich. That's really rich. He wants to know why I don't write. Why doesn't he ask my father why he doesn't write to me any more?"

"He does. Your father does write tae you."

"No he does not."

"I'm sorry tae have tae contradict ye, but he does. He sent you this for your birthday." He held out the box.

"Personal delivery?"

"It was Spock's idea, and I agreed tae do it. We lifted it from the mail container." Said so baldly it sounded a very strange thing to do.

Joanna's reply made it plain that she thought so too. "Big heroes! Well, you can take it back to my father and tell him that I've learned to do without him. I don't need him any more."

"I'll no' do your dirty work, Joanna McCoy." He flipped the box at her and she caught it. "If you want tae tell him that you can do it yoursel'."

"My name is Kendar." The girl's voice was flat, reminding Scott of the way Spock spoke when he was trying to hide his emotional confusion.

"Eh?"

"My name is Kendar. Mother got married again."

Somewhere in the depths of Scott's mind alarm bells started sounding Red Alert. "Do you write to your father?"

"Yes." The reply was sullen.

"Now, I find that tae be very curious. Very curious indeed. You write tae him and he doesna' get your letters, and he writes tae you and you dinna' get his."

"He must get them." The girl turned on him fiercely. "I send every four weeks, just like I have since the arrangement with Starfleet started."

"How?"

"What?"

"How do ye send the messages tae him?"

"The way that I was told to."

"Which is?"

"Don't you know anything?"

"Young lady, we'll have a little less of the cheek and a little more cooperation. I'm here because Bones is ma friend, and Spock and I care enough about him tae want tae try tae help him. If ye dinna want tae find out what's gone wrong with the system, then that's fine wi' me. I'll just go back tae the seminar and forget that I was ever here."

Jo looked stubborn, startled, scared and very young all at the same time. It only took Scott to move one step towards the door to have her clutching at his arm.

"No! Please don't go. I was rude. I won't be rude again. Please?"

Scott relented immediately. "I had no intentions of going. Why don't we both sit down and work through this step by step. Spock is a great advocate of logical problem solving, and I think that in this case he may have a point." He bent and scooped up the present. "You dropped this." He held it out to her again. "Don't you want it?" he asked.

The sight of tears gathering in her eyes prompted him to offer her an handkerchief. She accepted it with a nod and sat twisting it in her fingers, refusing to cry. She placed the present carefully on the seat beside her.

"Now you were going tae tell me exactly how you send those messages," prompted Scott after a short pause.

"I prepare them on the school computer and the school administrator transmits them to the Municipal Centre. Then I call the Centre and authorise the transmission."

"How do you receive mail?"

"I call the Municipal Centre and ask if there is any there. If there is I walk over and collect it."

"Umm. So you can create messages, but you canna send them out or get them intae the school's system. Sensible enough. Can ye use any terminal tae check the Municipal Centre?"

"Yes."

"Good. Would ye like tae try a small experiment?"

Joanna looked at him cautiously.

"All ye have tae do is call and ask if ye have any mail."

"I did that this morning. There wasn't any."

"Humour me, hmm?"

Joanna finally slouched across to the terminal, activated it, and pronounced the code for connection to the Municipal Centre. A pleasant computer voice said, "Please state department required."

"Incoming Mail," responded Joanna.

"Working... Please state name of recipient?"

"Joanna Kendar."

"Searching... No incoming mail for that name. Please state alternative name?"

Joanna turned to Scott. "See? Nothing!"

Scott took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Not quite nothing," he said carefully.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yon machine is asking ye for an alternative name."

"So?"

"When did you stop asking for mail in the name of Joanna McCoy?"

"When Mother said that Father had agreed to have my name changed from McCoy to Kendar." Her bottom lip suddenly trembled. "She said that he'd agreed." Her voice rose. "I thought she was being good. She said he'd agreed." Wailing, she cast herself into Scott's arms. "She's cheated on me again!"

Scott hugged her out of sheer instinct. Joanna burrowed closer, muffling her sobs against his chest. One part of his mind cursed Spock for getting him into this situation, while the rest of it remembered the beautiful woman he had met briefly years before, and wondered on the astonishing fact that McCoy's child seemed quite able to believe that her mother would deliberately lie to her. He hung on grimly and waited for the tears to cease. They finally did so, and she sat on his lap sniffing into the hankie.

"Mr. Scott," she began, "You are Mr. Scott, aren't you?"

"Aye. Did I no' introduce mysel'?"

"No, but it's okay. I recognised you and the Enterprise arrow." She traced the design on his shirt with one finger. "I apologise for my bad manners. I don't usually cry on people the first time that I meet them."

Scott's small devil prompted him to ask how she decided when people were ready to be cried on. He sternly resisted the temptation. He rightly thought that she wasn't in the mood for such a facetious remark.

"Quite a novel experience, really."

"Sorry. It's just that I let Mother cheat on me again, and she promised to be good. I should have known better. She always cheats when Daddy is involved."

"We canna be certain of that."

"I can. She made me promise that I'd call myself Kendar. She said that her latest husband liked the idea. I'd much rather be McCoy than Kendar. It's such a nothing sort of name. I get so proud when I read the reports about the Enterprise. Is she coming to Earth to collect you?"

Scott's smile wasn't entirely in response to the tentative one on Joanna's face. He was remembering a highly entertaining series of interviews with several senior officers, all of whom were busily trying to persuade him to remain on Earth and teach at Starfleet Academy.

"I'm afraid not. I'm no' important enough for that. Although it does seem that I've managed to upset a whole mess of people who all want tae argue wi' me about my theories of engine design."

"Oh. I just wanted to tell Daddy that I love him."

"There's nothing stopping ye telling him that, or anything else that ye want tae."

"But he hasn't had any of my letters."

"Only because ye were using the wrong name. Now if I understand the way this works correctly, all the tapes that you thought ye were sending tae Bones will still be at the Municipal Centre waiting for Joanna McCoy tae authorise their despatch."

"So I can still send them, and they were all dated, and some were picture tapes, so he'll know that I was writing. You do have good ideas. Thank you."

She hugged him, slipped from his lap and almost danced across to the terminal, confidently requesting the computer to change departments.

"Despatch," responded the same computer voice.

"I am Joanna McCoy. I wish to authorise the sending out of all outstanding mail from me to my father, Dr. Leonard McCoy, now serving aboard the USS Enterprise."

"Acknowledged. Please wait."

Scott's smile became a little broader as the girl started jiggling up and down, unable to contain her impatience.

"Despatch. There are fourteen messages waiting despatch to Dr. Leonard McCoy. Please identify which you wish to send."

"All of them."

"Please state method of payment."

Joanna looked to Scott. "What do I say now?"

He crossed the room and said into the voice pickup, "Payment has been arranged by the Municipal Authorities in agreement with Starfleet. Joanna McCoy is the under-age dependent of Dr. McCoy, and is entitled to despatch one message to him every four weeks. She wishes to utilise the unused allocation to send all the outstanding messages."

"Please wait."

"I hadn't realised I could do that."

"Lassie, I dinna know if ye can."

Her giggles were interrupted by the computer announcing, "Fourteen messages despatched. They will arrive at Enterprise in approximately nine standard days. Is there any further business?"

"Yes - please hold."

"What else is there?"

"I rather thought that ye'd want tae get his messages tae you."

Joanna's smile transformed her face. "Oh, of course. Computer."

"Working."

"Transfer to Incoming Mail department."

"Working... Please state name of recipient."

"Joanna McCoy."

"Searching..."

Joanna hung onto Scott's hand very tightly.

"Twenty-one items awaiting collection."

Joanna's whoop of triumph almost drowned out Scott's command of, "End transmission."

"Twenty-one items! Did you hear that?"

"Aye."

"Will you come with me to collect them?"

Scott swallowed a smile at the wheedling tone, and said seriously, "Well, that depends on how far away it is."

"Only about half a kilometre. We can walk it easily. If you'd like to, that is?"

"Do ye want tae go now or later?"

"Now, please. Then when we come back you can have tea with me, and have a big piece of my birthday cake."

"I'd like that fine."

"It's a pity that you're not allowed to send food in the mail. I'd really have liked to send Daddy a piece."

"Ye're forgetting - I'll be going back tae Enterprise. If ye felt like entrusting it tae me, I'd see if I could smuggle it aboard."

"You have very good ideas. Will you take a piece for Mr. Spock, too?"

Spock's voice replayed in his head. 'Birthdays are not celebrated on Vulcan.' He sighed and shook his head. "I'm afraid I dinna know if he eats birthday cake."

"No? Well, if I send a piece for him to Daddy, he'll know, won't he?"

Scott swallowed, trying to imagine McCoy's reaction to all this, and what he was going to say when he did know what he and Spock had done. "Either that or he'll find out," he said soberly.

"Good. That's settled. Come on."

"Are ye no' forgetting something?"

"Am I?"

"Yon present. Ye still havna' opened it."

McCoy hefted his package of mail happily. A swift check had confirmed that the outbound scout which had returned their engineer had also brought him another letter from Joanna. The arrival of fourteen messages in one bundle had delighted him, but left him sorely puzzled. He wanted to know why the letters, which had obviously been written over a long period of time, had not been sent until then.

Perhaps he'd get the answer from this tape. He'd refrained from reading it in sickbay, determined to wait and have the privacy of his cabin to allow him to savour his daughter's words.

He stopped and stared at the large box sitting innocently on his desk. Someone had obviously been in while he was on duty and left it there. He broke the seals and lifted the top from it, revealing the beautifully decorated cake inside, and a message tape. Numbly he picked up the tape and fed it into the playback slot. The screen brightened to show his daughter's face.

"Hello, Daddy. Thank you for my lovely present." The image touched the bright jewel at her throat. "I wear it all the time. Please don't be angry with Scotty and Mr. Spock. They only wanted to help you and me, and they did. Scotty came to see me, and brought your present, and sorted out the mixup over my name. It was Mother playing about again, but I've explained all that in my last tape, which should get to you at the same time as this cake.

"Scotty told me a lot about you and the things you've done since you joined the Enterprise. He came to see me three times while he was on Earth. He's very kind. He helped me choose this cake for you; he said that it was only fair, since he'd helped to eat my other one. I wish that I could deliver this in person, but he said that he couldn't smuggle me aboard, only my cake.

"It is good to know that you've got people like Scotty and Mr. Spock there to look after you. I'm very proud to be your daughter. Please share my cake with your friends, and look after each other.

"Oh, I remember. Scotty says that he doesn't know if Mr. Spock eats birthday cake, because Vulcans don't have birthday parties. That's sad, isn't it? If he does eat birthday cake, please give him a big slice. And please thank him for sending Scotty to help me.

"I love you, Daddy."

He held the tape he had played, and the one he hadn't, for a long time, then left to hunt down and corner Spock, only to find his quarry waiting for him outside his door.

"Doctor."

"I was just coming to find you."

"I assumed that you would wish to speak to me immediately. You are correct in your assumption that I ignored your expressed wishes and again interfered in your personal life. I offer my apologies for doing so."

"Did you ask Scotty to go and see Joanna?" His anger bubbled up, bright and hot as a nova.

"Affirmative. I also asked him to deliver your gift to her personally. I removed it from the mail container. The responsibility for this action is entirely mine. I did not mean to cause you offence. However, if you find that my actions are unacceptable and you wish me to request a transfer from the Enterprise, I shall of course do so immediately."

McCoy looked at Spock. The Vulcan was standing stiffly, almost radiating tension. His hands were hidden behind his back in his normal parade rest stance, but McCoy guessed correctly that they were clenched tight. Spock was waiting, patiently and without defence, for the expected condemnation of his actions, perhaps even for McCoy to strike him again.

His anger at Spock vanished as though it had never been, leaving vast sadness in its place. *Not that again, Spock. Never ever again. I learned my lesson the last time, and you've learned how to break all the rules. You've been living with this ever since Scotty left, haven't you? Joanna was right - it is good to have friends like you to look after me.*

"Have you ever eaten birthday cake, Mr. Spock?"

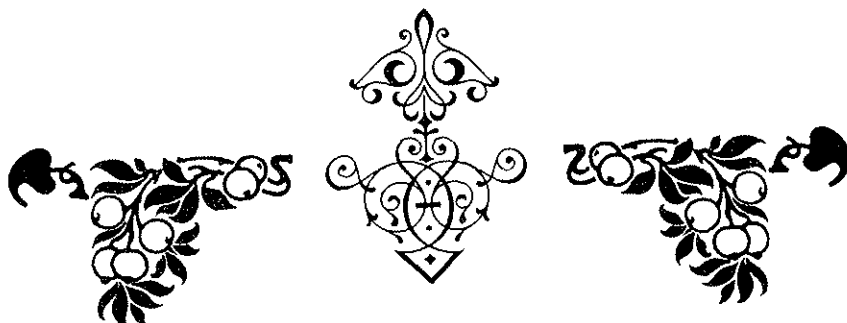
A slight crease appeared between Spock's brows. "No, Doctor."

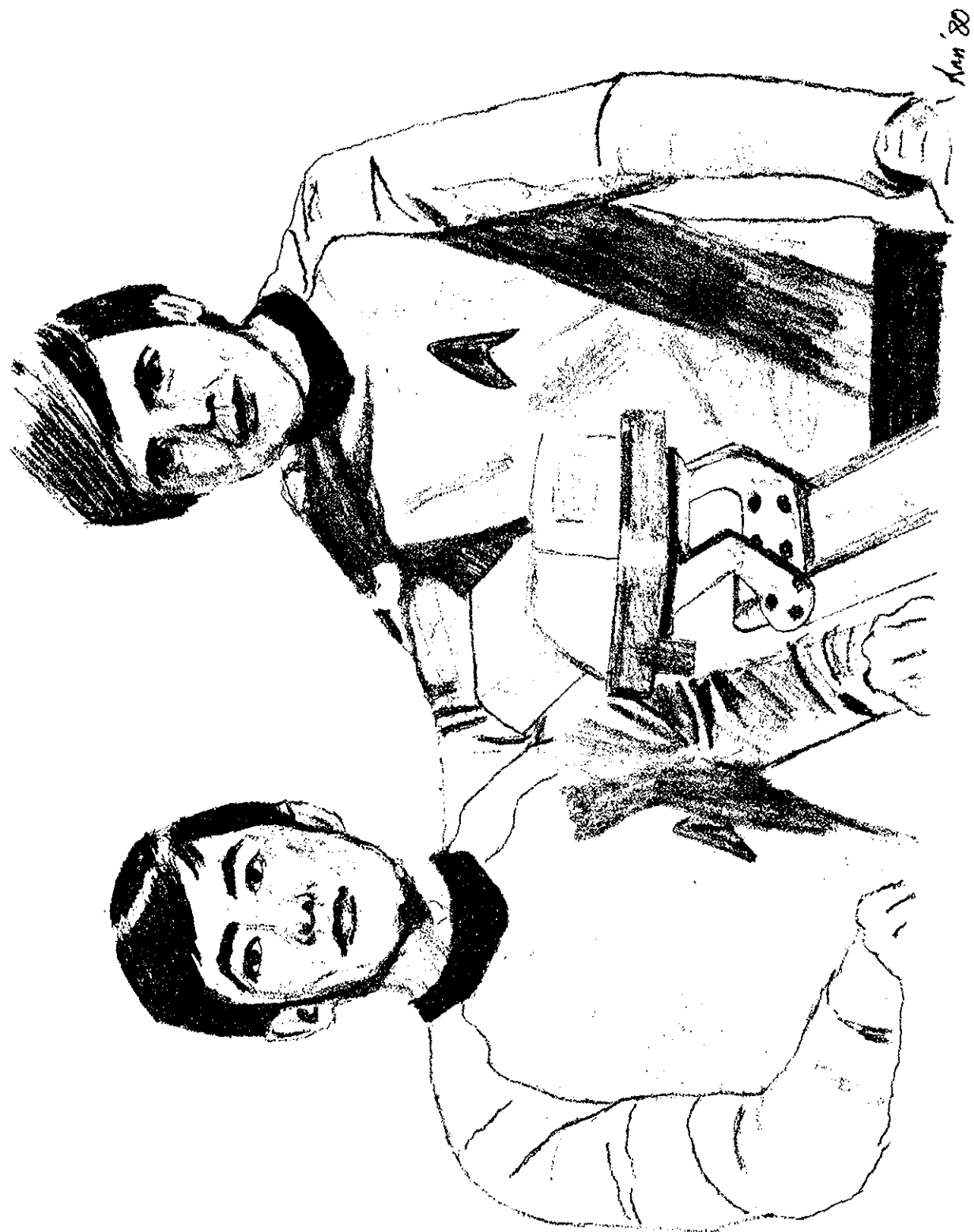
"Not even your own?"

"Birthdays are not celebrated on Vulcan as they are on Earth."

"No? Then it's high time you learned about birthdays and birthday cake. They're a fine old Human tradition, and it just so happens that I have an exceptionally tasty-looking specimen waiting in my quarters at this very moment. It was smuggled aboard by a maniac Scot, and if he's lucky we may give him a slice. Why don't you come in and try a piece?"

He touched Spock's arm, gently tugging the confused Vulcan towards the door, appalled at the rigidity in the muscles under his hand. "While you're eating I'll tell you about this lovely young lady I know on Earth. Her name is Joanna, and her father is lucky enough to have some wonderful people for friends. They manage to find ways to look after him even when he doesn't want them to. Does that sound like anyone you know, Mr. Spock?"





HOME

by

Vicki Richards

The spaceport hummed with activity. People everywhere; most humanoid, some not. Tourists, people travelling on business, Federation personnel either on their way to or their way back from wherever they were stationed, diplomatic envoys in transit, spaceport staff themselves; all knowing where they were going, moving in a purposeful way; yet all of them seemed happy. Amanda had often wondered at that.

These places always seemed to have the same sort of atmosphere; lively and yet at peace, somehow; as if all of the people there knew at some subconscious instinctive level that sentient beings were supposed to do this; were supposed to make it out there and into the galaxy and progress; it seemed right, somehow. On out into the galaxy, and then into the next, and then on, into the next universe perhaps? And where then? No-one had quite managed to answer that one yet, but someday... Oh, Amanda believed in it all, she knew it was the right way to go. But she was only Human, and just at that moment all she wanted to do was to get home and shut herself into a quiet room for half an hour.

She needed to think - it was all she seemed to have been doing for weeks - and as much as she always enjoyed the hubbub of a place such as the one where she sat, for once she wanted to get away from the noisiness. Although she felt she'd done nothing but ponder her problems for days on end, she still hadn't finished. She still had a final decision to come to. And only an hour before the shuttle was due to leave...

Someone else apparently felt very much the same way. Amanda noticed a lone Vulcan woman cross the transit lounge, a look of studied tranquillity on her face. Amanda knew Vulcans well enough by now to know that she was having a hard time keeping that unperturbed expression. Then the woman sat down on a vacant chair, and totally ignoring all the activity around her, she steepled her fingers in front of her, and immediately sent herself off into a meditational trance. Amanda laughed and thought *Good for you. Shows the rest of us how to cope!*

Then Amanda realised she *had* laughed - and how thoroughly she'd approved of the Vulcan woman's actions without even thinking about it. *How different I am from when I left for Earth*, she thought with some surprise. Only three short weeks since she had left for her holiday on Earth, and already she was a very different person. Perhaps Sarek had known that it would change her when he had so readily agreed that she should go - not that Sarek ever disagreed with anything she really wanted to do - but he had seemed so eager for her to go. Would he have been so keen for her to go if he had known that she had half-planned not to come back? Or had he known? He was Vulcan, after all, and sensitive; but far too honest and moral to ever pry into another's thoughts uninvited. But he must have known *something* was wrong. Sarek was *not* stupid. And not unfeeling, either, although Vulcan. She was coming to realise that.

Sarek, newly appointed ambassador-at-large for the planet Vulcan. Her husband of only a few months. She'd fallen in love with him, and had left her teaching job to marry him and move to live on Vulcan. She'd ignored all the warnings of how hard it would be, to live with someone who didn't believe in any emotion, let alone love, to live in a totally strange land; another world, one of the few offworlders there. But she had fallen in love with Sarek, and that was that.

But it *had* been hard. Oh, she'd expected it - she wasn't stupid either. However, day to day reality had been something else. The heat, the harsh dryness of the landscape - there was hardly any green *anywhere*. And the people. The endlessly fascinating Vulcans. Oh, they were fascinating - and wise, and serene - and completely *maddening*! Amanda had had logic till it was coming out of her ears.

And then there were the customs. Seemingly inbred and second nature in even the smallest Vulcan, but for her almost inexplicable at times, and complicated to remember. She felt as though she must have offended practically every important Vulcan she'd ever met from time to time, without ever intending to do that. Sarek insisted that they would know her intentions were good, and appreciate her efforts - after all, IDIC was a Vulcan concept; and she knew he was right; but it was no good, she still felt awkward. She, Amanda Grayson, who had always considered herself fairly graceful and reasonably accomplished in the social arts had begun to feel incurably clumsy and vastly ignorant. Again she knew that all those on Vulcan, especially of Sarek's family (sorry, clan, she hastily corrected herself), even the frightening T'Pol (and that lady was enough to scare the living daylights out of anybody - even Sarek, she was sure), did not regard her as such. Rather, they had done their best to assure her that she was coping very well with the difficult adjustment to life on Vulcan - and they knew how hard that must be for any offworlder - indeed, they had done their best to make her welcome, in the Vulcan manner. Sarek had chosen to marry an Earthwoman, and they had respected his choice, whatever private misgivings they might have had, and she was grateful to them. But again, what really mattered was the way that she *felt*. Something they *didn't* understand.

She had tried very, very hard to get used to it all. But in the end she had just felt so trapped, tied, almost suffocated by all their endless conventions and most of all by their eternal, all-powerful *logic* that she had just *had* to get away. Back home. Back to Earth.

All right, she had run. She could admit that to herself now. Sarek had encouraged her to take the 'holiday' and she had been grateful for his understanding - but she would have gone anyway.

The last straw had been when she had not been allowed to take up her career again, as had been planned. That had really done it.

When she had gone to Vulcan, the idea had been that she would make an in-depth study of Vulcan teaching methods in the schools, and the academies, and in the home, if she should be allowed to intrude that much into Vulcan privacy. It was a dream she had - to delve into the mysteries of the Vulcan Way, and perhaps to come to understand some of it, so that Vulcans themselves could be understood more by other Federation races, and that others could perhaps benefit by using some of the Vulcan methods on their own worlds.

Even T'Pol had agreed that it would be a worthy project. And

she had said that Amanda would be an excellent choice as the person to undertake such a work, once she had become thoroughly accustomed to Vulcan ways; after all, she was married to a Vulcan and would one day have her own child to bring up in the manner of that world, or so Sarek's clan hoped.

Amanda snorted to herself, annoyed even now. 'Accustomed to Vulcan ways', indeed! T'Pol ought to have said 'Vulcan idiosyncrasies'! It had been *months* - and permission to begin her project *still* had not been granted. The answer was always the same - when she had lived there a little longer, the time would come.

But *how* long? 'A Vulcan's concept of time is not exactly the same as a Human's - that was what Sarek had said, the last time she had asked. Oh, he had been kind and considerate as always, and diplomatic as the ambassador that he was - but this time the put-off had just been too much, and she had exploded, in a very unVulcanlike manner.

Poor Sarek had been quite taken aback - no wonder he had so readily agreed to her going away! She was quite glad now that no-one else had heard her outburst. By Human standards it might have been more than justified (and she really had felt much better after it) but it would have been a shameful thing for Sarek if it became generally known that his wife had actually yelled at him...

She could still see the expression of amazement on his face now. Poor Sarek. She supposed he had a lot to put up with, too. And when you came down to it, she did love him.

Yet her feelings for Sarek hadn't stopped her fleeing to Earth. On a hot, airless day when everything around seemed brown and parched, and everyone around seemed so - so *Vulcan*, and Sarek had come home and told her that permission for her project had been postponed yet again - then when she had raged at him he had answered her with calm and logic...

Amanda had been on the shuttle for Earth within three Vulcan hours. After all, if the Ambassador's wife couldn't get emergency clearance, who could?

But she hadn't been in the shuttle more than a few hours before she had begun to feel really ashamed at the way she had behaved with dear Sarek, who always did his best to try and understand.

And then, when she had first seen the familiar, beloved blue-white orb that was Earth hanging in the star-studded blackness, it had only been the presence of other people gathered round the viewing ports that had stopped her from actually weeping. Then she realised how much of her problems had been nothing but plain, ordinary homesickness. She should have realised how much she loved the planet of her birth.

Her three weeks at home had been wonderful, a time filled with fun, family reunions, parties - all the things that Humans like to do, all the things that she had been missing. But even while it had all been going on, Amanda had been thinking, thinking all the time. About her future. Hers and Sarek's. She didn't tell anybody *why* she was really there; somehow she didn't want to. And inexplicably when people asked her about life on Vulcan, she found it totally impossible to say anything negative.

It was during her second week, when she had been walking on the

green hills near her family's home, that she suddenly found herself comparing the emerald lushness with Vulcan's dryness. It was then she realised that they both had beauty. She remembered the beauty of the desert flowers; the sudden patches of green and the brightness of the flowers. The white, shining city that was Shikahr, with its peaceful walkways and lovely houses. It suddenly occurred to her as odd that a people who claimed to be so completely logical and without feeling of any kind could have created such a beautiful place. And none was more lovely than her own home, hers and Sarek's, old and lived-in, a welcoming place for all its grandeur. Yes, she had had to admit to herself that she was actually beginning to miss Vulcan. Even the dryness and the eternal red sky. After all, they did have their own kind of beauty. She supposed that was part of what IDIC was all about.

Yes, they are wise, these Vulcans, thought Amanda as she sat waiting for the boarding announcement to be given, *and worth getting to know.* Her eyes turned to the Vulcan woman, still peaceful and calm amid all the noise and madness. *When I get home, she decided, I'm going to get Sarek to teach me how to do that, if he can. And a lot more.*

At that moment she decided something else, a firm decision she would never go back on; or want to. When the time came, soon now, to board, she would get on. She would go back to Vulcan, and make it her home, and come to love it, the place and the people, as she realised she was already beginning to do.

Her thoughts returned again to the last few days of her stay on Earth. The family parties had somehow begun to pall; she had suddenly not been able to take all the laughter and mostly meaningless small-talk. Suddenly she had longed for someone to have a meaningful conversation with. Preferably a Vulcan. Preferably Sarek.

She had started to feel almost the same sense of irritation with Earth as she had felt with Vulcan before her flight home. Vulcan began to seem a welcoming place. She longed for its peace, and its wisdom. And yes, even its heat and the desert.

Even when she had discovered her old teaching job had become available again, it hadn't been the temptation to stay it once might have been. Amanda had felt a growing sense of homesickness again, and this time it had been for Vulcan.

But she still hadn't been entirely sure; all through the journey to the spaceport she had had misgivings. Not that she told anyone about it; it was her future, hers and Sarek's, and any decision she made would be hers alone. It had to be. Sarek would respect that, and would understand. Suddenly she had longed to see him.

Finally the announcement came - would passengers for Vulcan please board the shuttle. Amanda stood, and so did the Vulcan woman and one or two uniformed Federation people. *I am privileged to live there,* she thought, *and I didn't really appreciate it before.*

Privileged to live there, among that ancient, wise people, in the lovely city of Shikahr, with the mountains in the distance. One of the first Terrans to really get to know that world. And most of all, she was privileged to be the wife of Sarek.

Yes, she would go back, and willingly, and she would stay. Eventually they would let her carry out her project, she knew; for

they were an honest people, and they had not said 'no' - only, 'not yet'. She must learn Vulcan patience and curb her Human impetuosity. Amanda had decided that the Vulcan way was, after all, worth learning.

And she knew that they too would learn from her. She would be a representative of Earth, and she would do her very best to be accepted and respected.

Am I a trailblazer? she thought as she boarded. *Perhaps. But one thing I do know - I will be glad to see Sarek. Vulcan too.* She could hardly wait to get started on the garden she had planned to make - that too would be a worthy project, and for once she didn't care what T'Pol thought.

All that matters, she acknowledged to herself, is that at long last I'm beginning to realise where I really belong.



EXPEDITIONARY FORCE

(of a commercial kind)

by

Pac Deacon

This story is respectfully dedicated to

ROGER C. CARMEL

who died in November 1987.

The Enterprise was in orbit round Perry's Pleasure Planet - at last. Captain Kirk, not one to deprive his crew of an opportunity for shore leave, had given orders for rosters to be drawn up, and every day for a week batches of delighted Ensigns, Yeomen and other ranks had been following each other down in quick succession. Hours later they would return, staggering under the weight of a wide assortment of strangely-shaped packages which contained souvenirs of dubious aesthetic quality and even more doubtful authenticity - but who minded about that?

Today Chekov was having *his* turn. Gleefully hanging recorder and camera round his neck, and stashing his communicator and wallet of credits in safe pockets on his belt, he left his cabin and set off at a fast walk for the after-deck Transporter Room. He turned a corner, whistling in happy anticipation, but suddenly slowed down: a short, wiry figure, dressed in fencing shirt and tights, was coming towards him from the far end of the corridor, carrying an odd-looking bundle in his left hand. This person was growling angrily to himself in an undertone and slapping himself from time to time on the thigh in a very savage fashion with the bundle, from which came a peculiar and quite inexplicable metallic clashing noise.

"Hikaru!" exclaimed Chekov as they drew level. "What's the matter? How glum you look! I thought you had your chance to beam down yesterday. Did anything go wrong?"

"Oh yes, I beamed down all right," replied Sulu in exasperated tones, "and something went wrong! I've only been had for the naive, innocent, idiotic numbskull I am! I should know better by now than to let myself be conned by the rascally traders that infest pleasure planets. One hundred and fifty credits down the shaft - I really could kick myself from here to Talos IV!"

"Whatever did you buy that could cost one hundred and fifty credits?"

"This object!" and Sulu unrolled his towel and sweater to reveal an antique-looking rapier. It was rather beautiful, actually - but it was in two pieces, the blade being snapped clean across about ten inches below the guard.

"How on earth did you manage to do that to it? That shouldn't

be possible - should it?" (Chekov's knowledge of fencing was about on a par with his friend Hikaru's command of Russian.)

"Of course not - not if it was the genuine article. What I can't understand is this: I tested it out in the shop for springiness and balance, and it seemed perfect. The salesman was letting go cheap because it was originally one of a pair, and the other is lost. He assured me it was a genuine Earth antique, an eighteenth-century French duelling sword, if you must know: ever since I can remember I've longed to own one of those. I wish I had him here! Although he was twice my size in every direction, I'd teach him a thing or two about swindling the customer! Just you look out for yourself, Pavel, my boy - give him and his ilk a wide berth."

A more thoughtful Chekov made his way, feeling slightly depressed, towards the after section of the ship. He didn't see the Captain and ship's doctor talking in the corridor until he was almost on top of them, and gave a jump when Kirk, noticing his abstracted air, spoke to him.

"Well, hello there, Mr. Chekov! You don't seem to be looking forward to your shore leave as much as most of the people I've seen today..."

"It's not compulsory, you know, Chekov," put in McCoy with a grin. "You don't *have* to go!"

Their kindly concern loosened Chekov's tongue and he had told them all about Sulu's misfortune before it occurred to him that Sulu might not thank him for so doing.

"Don't worry, Pavel - we'll be the soul of discretion, won't we, Doctor? As a matter of fact, I think I'll beam down myself and take a look at this rascal's establishment: don't want my people swindled out of their carefully-hoarded pay. Did Sulu give you any sort of description?"

"Only that the vendor was extremely large, Captain - and that he had a feeling he'd seen him before somewhere - but that's impossible, sir, isn't it?"

"It gets more interesting as it goes on, Mr. Chekov. In fact, it's given me an idea. Meanwhile, thank you for telling us. Now, you watch your step down there!"

"Mind if I don't come along, Jim? I've got some intriguing little mysteries of my own waiting for me in my lab, and they won't wait much longer."

"That's all right, Bones. I'll take Mr. Spock and Mr. Scott: you never know what situation may arise, when a bit of extra weight to throw about might come in useful! But first a little call on Sulu, I think, is indicated."

And Kirk stepped into the nearest turbo-lift, which took him up several decks and deposited him near the officers' quarters. He strode purposefully along to Sulu's door and knocked gently.

Sulu, showered and back in uniform, was sitting at his desk ruefully contemplating the broken pieces of his rapier when he heard the knock.

"Who is it?" he called, without moving from his chair.

"It's Captain Kirk. May I come in for a second?"

Sulu leapt to his feet and ran to the door, which slid back. "Of course, Captain; I'm honoured. Is there something I can do for you?"

The broken weapon on the desk caught Kirk's eye and he moved across and picked up one of the pieces, which he turned over once or twice in his hand, holding the blade at eye level and squinting along it curiously.

"It's all right, Mr. Sulu, I've heard about your bad luck. It happens to the best of us at some time or other, you know. I can promise that neither the Doctor nor I will spread the story around. Now, what did the shopkeeper tell you about this weapon, exactly? and could you describe him for me in detail?"

After listening to Sulu's account, Kirk had just one more question.

"I wonder, Mr. Sulu - will you let me take this piece of the blade to the science lab and get Mr. Spock to run some tests on it? determine its age, composition, that sort of thing? He won't talk to anyone else about it, you can be sure of that."

Although rather mystified by such interest, Sulu was not about to say no to the Captain's request.

Kirk, Spock, and Scott, in casual dress, beamed down into a quiet side alley just off a bustling suh in the trading area of the biggest city on Perry's Pleasure Planet. 'Colourful' would not begin to describe the scene that met their eyes. Strange-looking beings from all over the Galaxy - Talosians, Andorians, Rigellians, Draconians, Babelians, Antarans, Terrans of all races, to name only a few - jostled up and down the narrow suhs appraising the amazing variety of wares on display, or haggled passionately with a stall-holder over the extortionate price of some desired object. There were no other Vulcans in sight: that did not surprise Kirk - after all, their idea of pleasure was quite other; he was relieved at the absence of Romulans and Klingons, who almost certainly would have been there for no other purpose than to make trouble. He had however detailed Scott to keep a special look-out so that the three of them could make themselves scarce if need be. Kirk had other plans for today than being drawn into a brawl with the enemies of the Federation.

As Spock gazed round him, trying to adjust his ears to the all-pervading noise, a memory stirred faintly... coloured pictures from a book... what was it?... ah!... yes... the "Arabian Nights"... he remembered the guilty pleasure of 'borrowing' the volume from his mother's bookshelf, sneaking it up to his room, and reading it in secret, stretched out on the hard floor under his bed, so that his parents should not be alerted by the gleam of his tiny light. He had been very small himself then. How far away it - and Vulcan - seemed now...

A voice brought him back to the present with a jerk.

"Well, gentlemen, let's get moving. We're looking for a shop claiming to sell military antiques and other things, situated in the Street of the Weapon-Forgers, where Mr Sulu says he bought the

rapier."

"An appropriate address, Captain, if I may say so," commented Spock.

"Indeed, Mr Spock. By the way, what did your tests come up with?"

"The blade is undoubtedly not made of Terran tempered steel, but a cheap twenty-second century imitation alloy, good enough to survive a cursory shop trial but bound to give way after ten minutes' subjection to real stresses and strains. I believe it broke in the course of a practice bout against one of the fencing robots in the Enterprise gym. The chasing on the blade contained traces of dust left by a modern power-tool: only the ornamental guard was of the period claimed, having originally belonged to a much older weapon."

"That report, together with the piece I've got with me, should be persuasive enough to make our friend, whoever he is, realise his best hope lies in a full refund of what Sulu paid him. Thank you, Mr. Spock! Now all we have to do, gentlemen, is find him."

At the other end of the suk ran a wider cross-street. They walked along this, Scott calling off the names of the suks they passed: Street of the Robe-Makers, Street of the Perfumers, Street of the Light-Sculptors - Spock wavered here but the others swept him on - Street of the Holographers, Streets of the Leather-Workers, Coppersmiths, Glow-water Distillers - here a firm hold had to be kept on Mr. Scott - Street of the Metallurgists -

"Ah!" said Kirk, "I think we're getting warm..."

He was rewarded with a raised eyebrow.

"I have been pleasantly warm ever since we arrived, Captain."

"Pax, Mr. Spock! - What did I tell you? here we are - Street of the Weapon-Forgers." They plunged into the suk, examining each establishment minutely as they slowly pushed their way through the heaving crowd. A narrower alley crossed theirs: on the corner a dark and shuttered building bore a discreet sign:

"GALACTIC GEM WAREHOUSES"

and beyond that stretched a row of antique-dealers' shops, including one or two displaying old Earth books in tattered bindings. They walked past these cautiously; then Kirk halted his two companions, laying a hand on each arm.

"I believe that is the place we are looking for."

The shop just ahead had a large, carelessly-painted signboard:

"UNIVERSAL ANTIQUES UNLIMITED"

Underneath it said, in smaller lettering:

"SILKS FROM ALL OVER THE GALAXY - SIRIAN FLAME-GEMS"

"COSTUME JEWELLERY GUARANTEED MADE ON DENEVA"

"MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS - SWORDS - DAGGERS"

"WHAT YOU DON'T SEE HERE WE MAY WELL HAVE WITHIN"

"ALL ENQUIRIES WELCOME"

"I doubt that ours will be," said Kirk, looking round in vain for the proprietor. There had been no name on the signboard. "A bad sign," remarked Spock as they entered. Kirk looked at him sharply but the Vulcan's face was quite expressionless. Kirk compressed his lips and decided to concentrate on the matter in hand. He had had a name in mind even before he had left the Enterprise, and a face that had seemed to fit Sulu's description; there were only two facts that worried him: first, Sulu had insisted on the man's great height - "Definitely taller even than Mr. Spock," he had said - but Sulu's eye level put him at a disadvantage when judging people's heights so Kirk was keeping an open mind on that one; second, the person whose face kept appearing before his inward eye should not be in a position to run a shop here at all: he should be more than fully employed on Space Station K7 in the vicinity of Sherman's Planet, light years away from here, filling a post which Kirk had personally obtained - nay, created - for him: that of Chief Vermin Exterminator to the Station. But Security on K7 had not been tight, and Cyrano Jones, slippery customer that he was, could have slyly regained possession of his vessel and made off at the next moment of crisis, when Security's back was turned.

Inside the shop a considerable degree of confusion reigned. Goods lay about on makeshift shelves or spilled out of packing-cases, as if the owner had just moved in. One whole wall exploded in an unbelievable riot of coloured 'silks', draped over what presumably were tailor's dummies; there were acid yellows of tooth-aching intensity, electric blues and billious greens, fluorescent oranges, screaming scarlets and atrocious magentas - and worst horror of all, a corner filled with 'tartans' that shrieked their Inter-Galactic origins in no uncertain fashion. Scott's face turned a dull red at the sight. Spock, who had gone the whitest possible shade of pale, raised his mental shields even higher, gritted his teeth, and said:

"There may be another room behind this one, Captain. Perhaps we could investigate further?"

As if by magic a garishly-clad figure appeared from behind a pile of boxes. He wore baggy satin trousers and a grubby bolero jacket open Turkish-style on a huge barrel chest smothered in matted dark hair. His large feet were thrust into yellow down-at-heel slippers with curly toes, and a veritable onion-dome of a turban, adorned with a nodding, tarnished aigrette, added to his already impressive height. As he advanced towards his three customers, the twinkling dark eyes in his walnut-brown face held a roguish smile, but whether it extended to his lips, who could say? for they were hidden by a generously full moustache and a luxuriant black beard. Kirk gazed at him in astonishment, and his pre-conceived theory fell into little pieces around him. This man did indeed tower over Spock, was broader than Scotty, and looked dreadfully, horribly familiar. Not only that: when the light fell on his customers' faces he stopped dead in his tracks and for a split second a hunted look replaced the roguish twinkle. Then, obviously getting a grip on himself, he resumed his professional manner and said unctuously:

"Good day to you, gentlemen. Always a pleasure to see persons of taste in my little shop. Is there some particular treasure you have in mind, or would you prefer to look round at your leisure?" He seemed in a hurry to leave them to it.

The voice. The voice clinched it. There was no mistaking those rascally eyes or that oily tone. The three Starfleet officers looked at one another. No need for telepathy or mind-meld here: each knew exactly what the other two were thinking. They all knew their

quarry. And it was pretty clear he knew them. But equally clearly, what he didn't know was - did they know that he knew? His attempt to retreat indicated a desperate clutching at straws.

Kirk took a step forward, Sulu's broken sword-blade under his arm.

"Harry! If it isn't our old friend Harry! Mudd, you rogue - what in the name of Mercury are you doing here? Isn't this kind of trade a bit below you? Small-scale retailing of inter-galactic junk and petty swindling, Harry? I'm really disappointed in you."

"Swindling, Captain?" spluttered Mudd indignantly.

"Well, what do you call this?" and Kirk, whipping the broken blade from its wrapping, lunged with it playfully in the rough direction of Mudd's ample waistband.

"Bought in your shop only yesterday, and now look at it. Just ten minutes' practice against a mere robot fencer, Mudd, and it snaps in two like the cheap fake it is!"

"Hold on, Captain Kirk, I never sold a fake in my life -"

"Before you indulge in serious perjury before witnesses, Mr. Mudd," said Spock in a freezing tone, one restraining hand on Scott's shoulder, "I think you should acquaint yourself with the contents of my lab-report on the item. Here is a copy, which you may wish to study in detail."

Mudd took it, bemused, and ran his eye down the page. A painful silence ensued. Kirk, sensing his advantage, and unwilling to listen to another of Mudd's outrageously unconvincing 'explanations', took the initiative.

"We will let you off this time, Harry Mudd, on two conditions: first, that you make me a complete refund, now, of the purchase price of this item, and second, that you close down this trap for the unwary that you call a shop and leave this planet within twelve hours, local time. Give me any argument, Harry, and we shall remember that we saw you here, in fact, I can promise you that we shall talk about it constantly to all who may care to listen. We are dining with the Mayor tonight, and -"

He was interrupted by a loud groan from the crestfallen Mudd, who was already at his battered cash register, extracting credit tokens from it with ill-disguised reluctance.

"You're a hard man, Captain Kirk, a very hard man indeed, but I suppose a poor struggling trader like myself has no choice. Here you are, take your refund! One hundred and twenty credits, wasn't it..."

"One hundred and fifty, you incorrigible wretch... Thank you, that's better! Now, start packing - and take my tip, Harry, don't sell any more fake rapiers on any planet, do you hear?"

"Except maybe to Klingons," put in Scott, with a ferocious scowl.

"Ah, well now, Mr. Scott, Klingons, you see - well, they're just not very interested in such delicate, beautiful weapons. They're after something heavier, usually - more obviously lethal, if you take my meaning? your genuine medieval battle-axe, your authentic spiked

ball and chain, your double-edged two-hander guaranteed to split a Federation officer clean down the middle at a stroke..."

"Enough of that, Mudd," said Kirk swiftly, stepping between his victim and his angry subordinate. "We've done what we came to do and we've said what we came to say. Now, you, just - remember!"

"Arrivederci, Captain, gentlemen," responded Mudd, his irrepressible grin reappearing as his visitors headed for the street.

"Not if I can help it," muttered Kirk to his companions.

"Captain," said Scott, "did you happen to notice those dummies under all that material? I got a close peek at one while I was waiting and d'ye know, I don't think they were shop-mannequins at all! They looked to me -"

"Don't say it, Mr. Scott! Don't even think it! In any case, they were all headless, weren't they?"

"Yes, Captain, but I tripped over a Stella head by the door when we went in: that's what made me curious about those dummies. He must have had expert help from somewhere: he could never have deactivated them on his own."

"Forget it, Mr. Scott; we don't really want to spend the rest of our precious shore leave in court litigation, do we? I've enough paper-work as it is. Thank you for your support, gentlemen; now, shall we find out what serious treasures the other shops on this planet may have to offer? The ship's commissioning anniversary party's coming up in three week's time - this is a heaven-sent opportunity to make it an even greater success than last year's."

"Och, Captain - I've laid ma wee plans already, and to tell ye the truth I'd rather keep out of temptation's way. With your permission, I'll just beam up back into ma own engine-room - there's those checks I've been wanting to get started on ever since we left Nagel V."

"All right, Scotty, you do that: tell Lieutenant Uhura we'll be following you back on board in a couple of hours. Now, what do you say, Mr. Spock? Care to accompany me through this maze and see what we can find for the Captain's and First Officer's Treat?"

The Vulcan nodded his acquiescence and the two strolled off together along Antiquarians' Alley. Very soon they found themselves gazing through a small diamond-paned shop-window at a jumbled collection of cutlasses, scimitars, old daggers, short-swords and fencing foils, for there in the centre lay the most elegant pair of rapiers, each backed by faded ivory satin in its very own tooled Spanish leather case. The price-tag said:

"Pair of genuine Toledo blades, complete with cases."

"2,500 credits. For sale as a pair only."

Kirk's face fell as he read it. No way could he afford all that for just one present. He had a young nephew with a birthday coming along shortly to think about as well. Spock, ever observant, said gently:

"Captain, there is a shop selling souvenirs of Earth's Far West period one hundred and fifty-seven yards down the next turning on our right, where you may well find more reasonably-priced objects that may interest you. I noted it on the way here. May I suggest that we

meet again outside the pet-seller's in, say, forty-five Earth minutes? There is a book store two doors further on which I should like to visit: it has a fascinating collection of works on old-Earth sciences."

"Excellent idea, Spock! See you in three-quarters of an hour, then."

Once again Kirk found he had every reason to congratulate himself on taking his First Officer's advice. The next half-hour proved to be enthralling. Not only did he find just the right gifts, at prices he could happily afford, but he increased his knowledge of his favourite period of Earth's history more than somewhat just in the course of prowling round the shop. Then he sauntered over to a stall on the other side of the suk which was piled up and all hung round with rather unusually imaginative party decorations, hats and favours. Lieutenant Uhura and her underlings would utter squeaks of joy when they opened *this* parcel! And what a time they would have transforming the ballroom of the Enterprise into a magical cave of delights for the anniversary party... Kirk chuckled to himself at the thought as he tucked the package under his arm. Then he began to retrace his steps, idly glancing at each shop he passed. "Cassi's Candy Store" - no temptation there for a grown man; "The Venus Plus X Sex Shop" (Kirk averted his eyes - who needed that when you could have the real thing by raising your little finger?) - "Vomisa's Paperbacks" - ah, here it was at last: the pet-seller's.

But no Spock was there.

Kirk looked at his wrist chronometer. He was two minutes early. So he looked into the petshop window, and then up at the signboard, which bore the name

"YENDI'S UNIVERSAL PETS INC."

and underneath:

"CUDDLY AND EXCITING ANIMAL COMPANIONS FROM EVERY KNOWN PLANET"

Lower down still:

"MAMMALIA - REPTILIA - BIRDS - FISH"

But it was the very small print that touched off an emotion in Kirk's breast:

"WE REGRET WE CANNOT SUPPLY TRIBBLES OR ANY OTHER PROHIBITED SPECIES"

From where he stood he could in fact see a larger notice within the shop, which repeated in heavy, black, hastily-scrawled letters:

"PLEASE DO NOT ASK FOR TRIBBLES!"

Next to it stood another, which said:

"PLEASE DO NOT INSERT PIECES OF FOOD INTO THE CAGES"

"ASK FIRST WHAT THE CREATURE EATS"

"N.B. VET'S BILLS WILL BE PASSED ON TO THE CUSTOMER"

"ARE YOU INSURED?"

Ask what the creature eats! Kirk was momentarily swamped by memories. Strange how events that had been traumatic at the time could be quite pleasant, even amusing, to recall later. Time was

definitely a healing factor... Time! He looked again at his chronometer. Seven minutes had gone by, and still no Spock. Memories of a much more unpleasant nature began to flood into Kirk's mind: Spock in danger on a Romulan ship, Spock dying in agony because of the Denevan parasite, Spock cut off from him in another time-warp, Spock kidnapped by Klingons...

Abruptly Kirk pulled himself together. Logic - he must be logical about this. What would logic suggest? Spock had mentioned a book store. Kirk set off at once in that direction, expecting every moment to see the familiar form coming to meet him. But he encountered no one but crowds of hurrying strangers. As he entered the store a pang of disappointment and anxiety shot through him, for it appeared to be empty. Then he noticed a rickety staircase leading to a floor above. He ran lightly up it and found himself in a room crammed with books from floor to ceiling: books stood in precarious piles on tables, floor and window-sills, and tumbled out of boxes, occupying, it seemed, almost every cubic metre of breathing-space. Right under the window, holding his book where the light fell on the page, sat a Vulcan, reading... Spock! Kirk's heart gave a thump of relief, and he was about to call Spock's name aloud when a fleeting ray of sunlight penetrated the dusty window-panes and gave him a clear view of his friend's face. The Vulcan was completely absorbed, quite lost to his surroundings. There was a smile on his lips: Kirk distinctly caught the gleam of white teeth. Lean fingers caressed the binding as they rapidly turned the pages and the whole body expressed careless ease and utter oblivion of self. Spock... happy?.... Kirk retreated soundlessly down the stairs to the lower room, where he spent a few minutes exploring the contents of the shelves. Then he began to stumble noisily over furniture and call for the proprietor in his most authoritative tone. When the man came, Kirk said loudly:

"Mind if I look around? Just thought you should know I was in the shop. Have to find a present for a friend!"

And he proceeded to rummage through the shelves like a seasoned bibliophile - or so he hoped. Moments later footsteps creaked on the stairs and Spock appeared, his arms cradling a pile of volumes. Mask back in place, he addressed his Captain stiffly.

"I must apologise, sir. My time sense was temporarily in abeyance. I hope you have not had long to wait on my account?"

"No, no, Spock, there's plenty of time. I too have found one or two things I'm going to ask our good friend here to wrap up for me," said Kirk genially. His smile did indeed suggest the cat that had swallowed the cream. The ghost of an expression of relief flitted across Spock's controlled features, then was gone as though it had never been...

Back on the Enterprise Kirk made it his immediate business to discharge two very pleasant obligations. Uhura received her parcel rapturously, but when Sulu saw the credits he had never hoped to see again laid on the desk before him he sat there open-mouthed, quite speechless with gratitude. By the time he had recovered himself, the Captain was out of earshot down the corridor.

Next morning an even greater surprise awaited him. Between breakfast in the ship's canteen and going on duty on the Bridge he had returned to his quarters as usual for a quick wash, and there on

his desk lay a long, slim package bearing a label with his name on it.

Strange, thought Sulu. I never ordered anything to be sent up from Perry's Planet. It must be a mistake.

He lifted the package to have a closer look. At his touch the paper gently unfolded of its own accord, revealing a case of soft, dark, slightly rubbed leather. A beautifully printed card said:

"Open Me"

Sulu obeyed. Inside, a vision met his eyes - a slender, steel sword, most beautifully chased, with a richly-ornamented guard, reposing on a quilted bed of old ivory-coloured satin. Out of the case fell a folded sheet of computer paper. He opened it and read, in growing bewilderment:

"Tenth Anniversary Celebration Party"
 "Commissioning of the U.S.S. Enterprise"
 "Programme of Events"

A thin red ink line led his eye downward to an item whose number was also ringed in red:

"Item 10 - Exhibition Fencing - Captain Kirk v. Lieutenant Sulu"
 "(A treat of dexterity, speed and style - don't miss it)"

The Captain! Sulu was galvanised into action. Seizing the magnificent gift, he ran out of his cabin and straight along the corridor till he reached Kirk's door. In his uncontrollable excitement he knocked far too loudly and then stood horrified at his own temerity. The door slid back and an amazed Kirk stood there.

"Mr. Sulu! Are you all right?"

Sulu was almost incoherent, and also out of breath.

"Captain! Oh! Captain Kirk! I apologise for banging - but this! this is just too beautiful! I don't understand! Why have you given me this incredible, marvellous thing...?"

"You too, Sulu?" Kirk beckoned him inside. "I'm very sorry, Hikaru, but you're mistaken: it wasn't me. Look!" and he gestured towards his bed.

On it lay a twin to the rapier Sulu held, and an exactly identical case. The wrapping was similar, except that this sheet had a gold edge, and so had the little card. Another programme lay on Kirk's table, and it too was decorated in red ink. Sulu stood speechless.

"It would seem, Lieutenant, that we have both been visited by the same munificent but anonymous genie," continued Kirk. "We know two things about him, though: one, he likes to watch fencing, and two, he thinks we both need exercise! You do realise that we shall have to spend most of our spare time together in the gym for the next three weeks, getting into shape and relearning each other's capabilities? We mustn't disgrace ourselves by falling short of people's expectations on the day!"

"It'll be an honour, Captain, a real privilege, to practise with you, sir," stammered Sulu.

"Seven a.m. tomorrow ship's time, then, in the gym?" asked Kirk, smiling.

"Yes, sir!" replied the delighted Sulu, who went away walking on air. Only when he got back to his cabin did he realise that he still did not know whom he had to thank for his splendid gift.

Kirk, left alone again, stared thoughtfully at the sword lying on his bed. He was ninety-nine point nine percent certain that he knew Who. There was only one person aboard his ship who could lay his hands on two thousand five hundred credits just like that - for the very good reason that he rarely took shore leave, did not drink or gamble, and never spent money on himself. What Kirk was working out was When and How. Perhaps *that* was why he had been kept waiting outside the pet-shop! Someone had quietly returned to the antique-dealer's when he, Kirk, was safely out of the way - the same Someone who had so thoughtfully steered him in the opposite direction first? and who had reached his own Mecca, the book store, later than planned? Vulcans might not lie to you, Kirk thought, but they could be quite devious when circumstances demanded it. But the packages - Spock had not been carrying anything except books, Kirk was certain. Then the solution occurred to him. Of course! the First Officer had simply had them addressed to himself and then beamed aboard the Enterprise direct from the shop; whatever crew member was on duty in the Transporter Room at the time would have had them sent along to Mr. Spock's quarters without giving the matter a second thought; many people had been taking advantage of that facility lately, after all.

As to Why... It seemed to Kirk that an irresistible impulse must have been involved; such a common experience for Humans - but for Spock? He knew too that his friend had a fine sense of justice: Sulu had had a crushing disappointment over the broken rapier, and one that was quite unforeseeable; Spock had evidently wished to compensate for an unkind stroke of fate by ensuring an equally unexpected surprise of a joyful kind. Perhaps he was thereby exorcising the memory of youthful disappointments of his own. Whatever the reason, it would be best for Sulu not to know; let him speculate for as long as possible about the identity of the mysterious donor. The young loved mysteries; there was little danger of Sulu's penetrating this one.

Three weeks had come and gone: the official party was over, and the hanging lanterns in the ballroom were going out one by one. A devoted volunteer was sweeping lengths of coloured paper streamer and pieces of burst balloon from the dancing floor, while another cleared away plates, glasses and bits of uneaten anniversary cake. Happiness still hung in the air. The party had been a wonderful, magical, glorious affair, the very best yet. They had had a dazzling display of speciality dancing, and then they had danced themselves; Uhura had sung song after song to rapturous applause, and then they had danced some more. A comic turn from Kevin Riley and friend had brought the house down; really advanced conjuring tricks performed with breathtaking sleight of hand by Ensign Daniels had held them spellbound, and they had pestered Mr. Spock for explanations, which had not been forthcoming (could it be that he really didn't know? an Enterprise "first"??) After the Highland dancing, led by Mr. Scott in full rig and Christine Chapel in a white silk dress and tartan scarf (genuine this time), they had flung themselves down breathless in a big circle and the First Officer, who had indeed brought his harp to the party, sat and played for them, an intricate, fugal composition which demanded, and got, their rapt attention. Finally,

the fencing exhibition had been quite brilliant, and Doctor McCoy, claiming to represent the whole crew, had presented both participants with a medal, which had proved to be, surprisingly, of the edible kind...

The ship still hummed with talk and muted laughter issuing from the cabin doors left ajar and echoing down the rapidly-emptying corridors. What was going on now in the Captain's and First Officer's quarters - whose connecting doors were wide open - was the Party-after-the-party, a long-standing custom which the ship's officers fondly imagined the rest of the crew did not know about.

Most of the traditional anniversary surprises had already been exchanged, but Kirk had kept back two very special ones for this gathering: Mr. Chekov's and Mr. Scott's. He wanted the recipients to have to open them in public! Each was handed his rectangular package as he entered. With the eagerness of youth, Chekov was first into his. A gasp of pleasure was heard as he pulled out a book and saw its title. Bowing to popular demand he read it out aloud:

"THE INCREDIBLE LIFE STORY OF THE LITTLE OLD LADY FROM LENINGRAD"

"Captain! Where *did* you find this?"

"In a certain shop on Perry's Planet, Pavel. I thought it might be what you have always wanted."

"Oh, yes, Captain! Thank you *very* much! I didn't know such a work existed." Chekov turned excitedly to the title page. Then his face clouded over: the sub-title said:

"A work of Romantic Fiction, set in Tsarist Russia"

"Captain! This is *fiction*! I thought -"

"Yes, of course it is, Pavel - hasn't everything you have ever told us about her been fiction? Cheer up! This is sure to give you some new ideas to regale us with at moments of crisis!"

A ripple of affectionate laughter greeted this sally and Chekov had the grace to give a rueful grin. The Captain was probably right, at that. And the book's numerous engravings were very beautiful, and quite authentically nineteenth century.

"Now, Scotty," said McCoy impatiently, "what's your surprise? Come on, man, don't keep it to yourself!"

The meticulous Chief Engineer had just finished carefully folding up the outside wrapping, which he had succeeded in not tearing, and now he was gazing in some trepidation at his present. Slowly he held it up for all to see. It was obviously heavy, and bore the title:

"OUR LIFE IN THE HIGHLANDS"

An embossed portrait of the distinguished authoress occupied most of the front cover. Uncontrollable guffaws and chuckles broke out all over the room, as growing horror spread across Scott's face while he read the message on the card attached:

"For an engineer who overworks - the most untechnical book ever published on Scotland." Underneath was added: "A sure cure for insomnia."

Fearing lest he might this time have gone too far, Kirk hastened to call out:

"It won't cure your insomnia unless you open it, Scotty! Press the clasp!" The bewildered Scott did so. There was a breathless pause. Then a broad smile lit up his features. He turned the object round and held it high. It was hollow - not a book at all, but a box. And in it sat enshrined a really rare treasure - a dimpled, oval bottle filled with a dark sapphire-blue liquid. Scott read the label aloud.

"Finest Old Saurian Brandy. Matured Five Hundred Years in Cask."

"Gold Medal, Inter-Galactic Vintner's Exhibition, Paris, Earth."

"Stardate 1.097.3"

"Oh, well done, Captain!" said McCoy admiringly, and to Scott he added,

"Don't open it now, whatever you do, Mr. Scott. Give yourself ample time to contemplate it first. This nectar should not be mixed in the gut with inferior liquids. It deserves an evening to itself. One mouthful is guaranteed to bring back to mind all the highlights of one's life to date. Believe me, Scotty, I know what I am talking about - you see, I've had my present already. Concealed in a fake Medikit container, mine was!"

"Captain?" said Uhura, when the applause had died down. "May I show you my surprise? It's the most lovely thing - I just had to bring it along to show around. Aren't the pictures adorable? And it's so poetically written, I simply can't put it down. But the odd thing is, the sender doesn't give his name: the only card in it was this one."

As she held out to Kirk a little silver-edged slip of pasteboard, Uhura flashed a keen glance round the assembled company. Her eyes lingered for a fraction of a second on one particular face, which however remained totally impassive. Kirk, taking the card, saw printed on it in neat lettering the words:

"Read Me"

He suppressed a start and refrained with some difficulty from shooting a glance at the tall, lean, silent figure sitting quietly in a shadowy corner of the room.

"I must plead not guilty this time, Uhura," he said. "Please do show me your surprise."

The pictures were, indeed, fascinating. Many of them depicted a narrow river, flowing peacefully between green meadows, under beautiful trees whose branches touched the water. Earth! A wave of nostalgia hit Kirk. He took a deep breath. He could almost smell it - the warm soil after rain, the scent of willow pollen and laid dust... But the foregrounds: they were really amazing - filled with small animals wearing human clothes! Here, a rat and mole actually sat in a row-boat with a picnic-basket between them; and here, a toad, in really old-fashioned motoring leathers and goggles, postured in front of a stately house; in a third, a badger, in check coat and gaiters if you please, and armed with a large stick, was chasing a horde of weasel-like creatures through a tall, dark, sinister wood...

Kirk had seen nothing like it before in his whole life. One thing he realised: whoever had offered this little masterpiece to

Uhura had not forgotten her earlier affection for the furry tribbles and her grief at their unfortunate but necessary demise. This delightful tale was the perfect consolation. Kirk marvelled at the insight that had dictated its choice. Truly, he thought, Someone had depths - not unsuspected, of course; but revealing themselves more fully as time went by, in ways he had once not dared to hope might be possible. He risked a glance at last in his friend's direction, and saw, with a leap of the heart, that almost imperceptible glint in the dark eyes, and round the mouth that very special ghost of a smile, which told him without words what Spock, if challenged, would always firmly and heroically deny.

Gradually the Party-after-the-party also wound down to its inevitable close. Friends began to drift away, making brief farewells at the door. After all, they were all going to meet again on the Bridge in a few hours' time... At last only Spock remained. As he rose to his feet and moved towards his quarters, Kirk gathered up his courage and spoke.

"Grant me a moment or two more, my friend, if you are not too tired."

"As you will, Captain." The Vulcan mask seemed impenetrable now. Kirk swallowed hard, and kept his tone light.

"Some pleasure planets do live up to their name, after all, eh, Mr. Spock? Your own brief visit there would seem to have been not unfruitful."

"Serendipity did seem to be at work, Captain, I agree."

"Ah, yes, Mr. Spock, but it had help, it had help. Quite a few people have experienced rare moments of happiness lately, a fact I believe to be not totally unrelated. As I am one of them, I beg you to show true Vulcan tolerance and allow me to indulge in the old Terran custom of saying thank you. Wait - don't go: this has been my only real chance to offer you your surprise. Won't you please open it?"

Kirk held out a slim, flat, flexible package in a simple wrapping. Spock took it without a word and opened it carefully. A music manuscript emerged.

Not new. Pages browned at the edges. They turned easily, made supple by long use. A title:

"Sonata for Violin, by J.S. Bach"

"Arranged A. Segovia, for the classical guitar"

Spock looked up at his friend. His eyes were very bright.

"Forgive the fact that it is not new, Spock. It belonged to my mother. It was one of her favourite pieces, so I heard it often when I was a child. I don't know of any music outlet where you can get it now. I'm sure you can adapt it for your own instrument - I know that for you, transposition is child's way. It would be nice to hear it played again: it's been so long."

The quiet voice replied:

"You shall, Jim. I promise. It will be my privilege."

Long fingers touched Kirk's shoulder and lingered there for a

fleeting second... Then pages rustled... a door slid to, almost inaudibly... Spock was gone. Kirk drew in a long deep breath of unalloyed happiness, glanced up at his new treasure gleaming down from the wall, and went to bed.



A DREAM FOR THE FUTURE

Man and God together are making this sky:
Mackerel-dappled clouds imprint the blue;
White Indian-feather trails, converging to
The point where jet planes had a rendezvous,
Cross the blue deserts lying still and high
Pearled with faint tinges that dislimn and die

And I look up with dazzled, searching eyes
Trying to see beyond habitual hues
To that far point where past and present fuse
Into so many futures we may choose
Where lovelier than now we can devise
Comes flashing in from space the Enterprise.

This matchless vessel gleaming in her pride
Seems all with majesty and grace imbued.
Small wonder that her Human Captain wooed
Fate, gods and men in irresistible mood
To take her out again upon a tide
Of destiny for them and more beside.

On nights of summer, twilit, deep and cool,
And starry depths that stretch for mile on mile,
The time will come for we'll take no denial
When we shall see both Earth and Vulcan smile,
And Enterprise hang circling like a jewel
Fresh-spilled from Heaven's planet-haunted pool.

Pac Deacon



A VULCAN ACT OF COURAGE

by

Linda Bryant

Captain Kirk brought his gaze away from the viewscreen and the monotonous starfield he'd been looking into but not really watching, aware of a non-routine movement in his peripheral visual field. He analysed the movement, replaying his visual memory. Uhura had activated the tie-in mode on her console, piping a signal to Spock but continuing her conversation with the communications officer of the Ascension - normal sub-space chatter. Spock had an earpiece in, but his concentration appeared to be on his sensors and the com link with the science department.

Kirk listened in; it sounded like a routine re-calibration. He was prepared when Spock swivelled round a few minutes later and asked for permission to leave the bridge and deal with a problem in the science labs. Kirk gave his permission, and Spock passed the science station to his relief, then with a glance at Uhura walked to the turbolift.

Kirk replayed that glance in his memory. If it hadn't been Spock...

Spock. For a moment he had been uneasy about Spock. Why? Kirk shrugged and brought his attention back to routine matters. Maybe routine was getting to all of them, and he'd break concentration and ask Uhura for the news and gossip from the Ascension.

The thought connected and stilled his tongue and, pensive, he remembered. Over the past few weeks he had seen Uhura tie her console into Spock's with unusual frequency for a routine mission. He had caught Uhura watching Spock too, but he could not analyse her expression. Still, if it were something he should know about Uhura would tell him. Probably she was just keeping Spock informed - Kirk grinned to himself - initiating Spock into the very Human pastime of subspace gossip, obviously of a purely scientific nature.

Spock was disturbed. He gave up trying to meditate, slowed his thought processes down and tried to verbalise the reasons for his disquiet. He sighed. It was a very Human need, as if to verbalise his thoughts would make them more concrete, not tie them in a mass of syntax. Was it not word structure on which Humans based their reasoning and passed it as logic? There seemed to be no way to analyse the unspoken web of their relationships, for the Humans were so dependent on verbal communication.

The question was, how much did they know or guess? Take Uhura, for example. The difficulty was that he was unsure of her motivation and how much she had picked up of his ideas. Starfleet communications training for Humans heightened their innate ability to receive but taught them no barriers, so that what they received was echoed back. Uhura had natural barriers, but the response was still amplified between them.

Uhura instinctively raised her barriers when she was in direct contact with him, as did Kirk, but whereas Kirk reached out to him, spontaneously lowering those barriers, Uhura always held back.

He caught the thought. It was a precise description. Uhura always held back, and any attempt on his part to touch an untrained, naturally shielded mind could shatter it.

Spock shuddered. For the past 3.6 weeks alien thoughts had been ghosting in his mind despite his constant barriers. It was not his emotional reaction to Captain Pike's injury, but a feeling that there was something imperative to do in connection with him. Vulcan ties of loyalty to a commander were part of his ethics.

More at ease with this, Spock allowed his thoughts to deepen. Immediately he felt the pressure of alien thoughts. Kroykah, not again! Wearily he slammed up his barriers, shutting off the contact and the knowledge that at some level he was assessing a train of thought not of his instigation.

Alien contact. Spock thought of the numerous first contacts he had been part of over the years...

Christopher Pike and the Talosians. As a lone Vulcan mind, Spock had been unable to distinguish the illusions. Vulcans could link minds to hold on to one reality, and by comparison could tell that reality from another while linked. How was it that the Humans suspected the illusions first? He had discussed the report to Starfleet with Captain Pike, Number One and Dr. Piper. How Captain Pike had suffered in his responses to the situations the Talosians had taken from his mind, yet had been open, even compassionate, to the Talosians' needs.

As a Vulcan he could not risk opening his mind to that extent, but how was it Pike perceived the illusions? Pike said it was only a suspicion born out of desperation when every resistance he offered was countered as if they knew his every move, and intuitively he had seen the possibility and projected his anger as a force to blind them.

Spock had responded to the scenario pulled from Pike's mind. He understood the need to be free, to be valued individually, and the great horror of captivity, of being part of the menagerie.

That was the thought that hurt. Was Pike projecting how he saw Spock? All his life he had been watched as an unknown species, captive, caged by his own hybrid nature as Pike had been by his mind, the freak in the menagerie. Not Vulcan, not Human, but hybrid.

He let the wry amusement at himself surface. It was not that it was not logical to question his inheritance, but rather that hybrids, if they were viable, usually had a greater vigour to survive. Spock was curious about life - Vulcan, Human or alien.

Spock appeared Vulcan, and he had chosen the Vulcan way, but once in a first contact of a different kind he had been surprised. Harry Mudd, stepping off the transporter platform and noticing his unguarded reaction to his companions and - in the privacy of thoughts he could admit it - his own response to Mudd's 'cargo' had summed him up instantly. "Half Vulcan, eh?" His own sense of humour had responded, and he had set his Captain up, knowing he would share the

response of these perceptive Humans.

Humans! he mused. *Only Humans could have classified Harry Mudd both as a first contact and an illusion.*

Spock pulled his mind back into discipline. The thought crashed in.

What of James Kirk? He who accepts you as you are and calls you friend.

What of the extraordinary capacity of that man above others? Captain Kirk, walking the delicate line between different cultures and emerging with honour - Vulcan, Human and Romulan - in accepting the Balance of Terror. Captain Kirk, responding with bluff and leaving pride in the outrageous Corbomite Manoeuvre.

Spock had discussed their respective reports in both cases. Kirk's acceptance of the Romulan for whom there was no life without honour, his understanding of the bond between the Commander and the Centurion, and his respect for them when death was the only honourable solution. Kirk could accept that solution with the reassurance that in a different reality they could have been friends.

And Balok. Balok was incomplete. He did not use any tactics to convince Kirk of his intent - he was not committed.

Spock had been aware of undercurrents Kirk seemed unable or unwilling to analyse. The Romulan had been accepted as an entity and his actions honoured. Balok had been tested and found wanting, and Kirk had lost interest and left him to mature. Where did that leave Spock by Kirk's standards? Was he accepted as an entity? Did Kirk's judgement ever fail?

Charlie X. Spock considered their reactions to Charlie X and the hold he had over them. Kirk had been very uneasy around Charlie. Kirk was always so certain of his own responses. If Kirk had had Charlie's powers, would he have controlled them? What if, as with Gary Mitchell, those powers were beyond his control? How would Kirk respond? Kirk had given Charlie back to the Thasians, at that stage the only logical solution, but Spock knew he considered that mission a failure and never discussed it.

Eventually Kirk had killed Gary Mitchell - or, in his own words, what Gary had become - because Gary could not control his powers. How would Kirk respond to *him* if he used a power he could not control? Would Kirk withdraw his trust and turn away?

Remember Kodos the Executioner? Captain Kirk was fair and gave him every chance to prove a defence before allowing him his own form of justice. But was it really a choice? Was Kirk capable of accepting a different ethic? By his own ethics Kodos' solution was logical and his decision correct, but he was Human and his judgement ultimately untenable. If Spock applied Vulcan ethics, would Kirk accept that solution?

It was not logical to speculate on insufficient data, nor to procrastinate when he had decided on a course of action and to accept the consequences. There was only one other consideration to review, for whatever the consequences for himself he had to try to protect those Humans.

Spock reviewed that final memory. Dr. McCoy's medical records

included command psyche tests. Spock's security rating gave him access to all but certain classified sections of the tests. He knew the classification of the sections he wanted to check. Since Pike's contact a simulation drawn from his Talosian experience was given as a command psyche test. Spock knew that all the officers who had passed had high overall scores, but he needed details.

He had logged Dr. McCoy's setting up his computer system when he first came aboard. The number of error commands was unprecedented. Spock allowed his lips to relax in amusement. Dr. McCoy had quickly realised that Spock's attention was drawn to his 'problems', but he had continued his work. Spock monitored his use of the computers, but every time he perceived a pattern in the doctor's apparently random testing of the programme, it changed. Finally he had gone to sickbay.

"Doctor, can I help you with your programme?"

Testily, Dr. McCoy had replied without looking up from another set of illogical and incorrect commands. "No, no need, Mr. Spock. It's okay, standard." The doctor had then looked at him with what he now recognised as a deceptively innocent look. "I've just been setting up my own security blocks."

Spock's eyebrows rose, uncontrolled. With a fine dry delivery McCoy continued,

"Seems to me you learn more about a system by finding out what it *doesn't* allow you to do than by what it *does*."

Spock had long pondered the logic of that, for a system was only set up to do that which you programmed it to do...

After 48 hours of constant activity using the whole of the Enterprise's computer banks Spock had broken the code only on Dr. McCoy's own record - L. McCoy and his birthdate. Very original. Into the record, Spock realised he had been caught without knowing the trap he had sprung. Quietly McCoy's voice came over the intercom.

"Mr. Spock, I trust you have a good reason for what you want to know. C'mon down, you've only to ask me."

Spock sat opposite the doctor in McCoy's office and met the intense blue gaze.

"Spock, I won't ask you why. Whose records do you want?"

Spock told him. McCoy steepled his hands in unconscious imitation. "Spock, I'll trade. Let me link you to my own psycho research tricorder programme while you read those records, and it's a deal."

Spock found himself seated at McCoy's computer and linked to an inelegantly modified tricorder. McCoy should let a competent technician do these jobs for him. McCoy signalled that he was releasing the blocks on the data Spock wanted. Uncertain, Spock hesitated. He did not know if McCoy had read any meaning into his research, and didn't know what his enquiry had given away. It was not logical, but he felt the doctor knew what and why he was researching.

Uhura's file, Talosian section, appeared. Quickly Spock checked the result coding, unsurprised by the high score. He watched the data readouts. Uhura was quite calm in the sensory deprivation chamber, shutting down her responses, concentrating on internal body mechanisms very smoothly. For the first few illusions from her own mind she was uneasy, but able to ride the memories, holding off from nightmare. A note referred to her naturally learned control of dreams.

Gradually Uhura tired and her control wavered. Intently Spock studied the brain scan traces. Used to Vulcan scans, he noted the pulse of delta and theta waves beginning to match in rhythm but held back by conscious control. It was not noted by the medical supervisors. Spock checked his own responses, knowing McCoy was reading him and in respect of Uhura's privacy. He suspected that Uhura knew what she was doing, but had kept knowledge of her control from Starfleet. Finally Uhura twitched, an involuntary spasm from exhaustion, and the delta and theta waves peaked and dominated the pattern. Uhura relaxed into a natural trance. The medical supervisors seemed unsurprised and finished the test there.

Spock found he had tensed and the screen blurred.

"Steady, Spock. " McCoy sounded amused. "Take a break while I reload this. Who do you want next?"

The doctor's babbling was insupportable. "Yours, Doctor." Spock realised he had made a tactical mistake. McCoy knew his own record, and would be able to concentrate on his response to it.

For the next 20 minutes Spock was grateful for Vulcan control and honoured by McCoy's trust. The doctor relived each of his nightmares in full gut-wrenching horror, but each time he managed to counter the problems with compassion and a fierce hope. Each time McCoy tried for control, tried to find an inner rhythm and hold it. Each time he failed. Finally, exhausted, he curled into a foetal ball and his mind began to drift, but still he fought for consciousness and would not give in. Finally his blood pressure dropped and he was able to concentrate just on breathing and find a measure of relief, for he was almost comatose.

Spock lifted his head, unseeing. McCoy reached out, then stilled the action.

"Spock, loss of control is not such a bad thing for Humans. We can build it again, and..." casually, McCoy added his reassurance, "...Jim Kirk controls better than me."

Spock studied the rating given to James T. Kirk and almost checked for confirmation. He followed the readings as Kirk was in the sensory deprivation chamber. Kirk was slower than Uhura to shut down his sensory loads and stabilise. When the illusions were picked out of his memories they were easily controlled, suppressed, the Human substituting other memories he could accept and live out the negative emotions on.

Gradually the illusions became more persuasive and all-pervading, and Kirk lost control. This new phase was marked by restlessness and peaking in physical activity and emotional release. Jim's comment was recorded - "For crying out loud!"

In the wake of this catharsis Kirk's brain waves stabilised, but instead of entering a trance state he still fought back. The screen

filled with readings of his sexual arousal as his brain fought with his own illusions - a Human sexual fantasy.

Spock visibly jumped as Kirk himself burst into sickbay in search of McCoy. For one glorious moment McCoy thought he had caught Spock's response to an act of sexual voyeurism.

Spock brought his thoughts back and considered his options. The odds were that Uhura, McCoy and Kirk would not be harmed by his actions. For the last time he thought of the friendship and trust he would lose. He held on to the image of James T. Kirk faced with his inner knowledge that Karidian was Kodos the Executioner, but insisting on proof before he would challenge the man. Spock would find the courage to face James T. Kirk and the soul of Christopher Pike.

Spock cleared his thoughts. He gazed into the cool flame of the firepot. In an act of Vulcan courage he opened his mind to the Talosians.



HER DREAM, MY REALITY

Can you miss somebody you have known only for hours?
If you can, I still miss Edith.

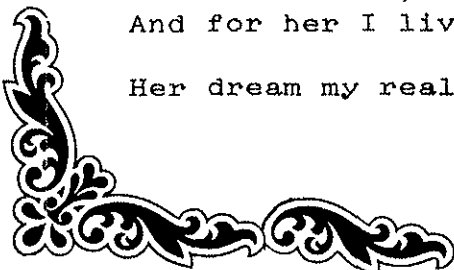
Years have passed, yet...
I still see her smile, hear her voice.
Our romance was over before it had begun.
And Spock was right, as always...

It was hard to see her die.
Yet it's harder still to hear her echo in the ship
In a future she would never have known,
Even if she had lived to see tomorrow...

She lives. She walks beside me still,
Just as Spock does.
And yet - she died for her dream,
To allow the dream to become a beautiful reality.

So I must accept the ghost from the past
Who follows me, watches me -
And for her I live,

Her dream my reality.



Karen Hayden
&
Elizabeth

SELF SEARCH

by

Gail Williams

I crawled out from under the tangled wreckage of the navigation console, to be met by a scene of total chaos and destruction. Navigation had been one of the first stations to go, and desperately I twisted my head round, searching for the helmsman who had borne the brunt of the blast, but the acrid smoke made my eyes sting so that their watering prevented me from seeing anything except a blurred image of burning, crackling machinery and equipment.

I made the mistake of breathing in, and as the smoke seared my lungs I began to cough and choke.

I knew that resting my butt on the deck was not getting me anywhere, so, spluttering and wheezing, I groped my way over to the command chair with the vain hope that the Captain just might be still alive. I grabbed hold of the armrest and hauled myself to my feet.

Through the dimness the glow from the burning science station cast an eerie, flickering light over the dead Vulcan's sallow complexion. Captain Sarat was slumped in the chair, a rivulet of green, copper-based blood trickling from the corner of his mouth, his eyes open and as cold in death as they had been in life.

I was the only one left.

Futilely, I pressed a button on the con, and in between coughs managed to croak out a distress call.

"This is a priority one distress signal; repeat, this is a priority one distress signal. USS Baltimore requires immediate assistance at coordinates zero, zero, three five."

There was no reply, only the hiss of static. I turned to the viewscreen and saw the Romulans closing in for another attack. In vain I pressed another button.

"All hands, abandon ship..."

I saw the photon torpedoes streaking towards the dying ship, and launched the log buoy. It was the last thing I remember doing.

I had been dreading the command test. It was not even my test - I mean, I was only a participant; Lieutenant Sarat, being groomed for command, was the victim - but I dreaded it all the same, just as I dreaded the written examination, the class demonstrations, the landing party exercises, the public speaking sessions... in fact, anything that put me in the spotlight.

I had been in Starfleet four years, since I was sixteen, the only daughter from a family of five strapping sons, a shy, small town girl who hated the city traffic, the haste and the faceless inhabitants, who had my head in the clouds, loved plants and animals,

the rain in my face, the wind in my hair, and who wanted to reach out and touch the stars.

Dad had silently presented me with the Starfleet Academy prospectus as a fait accompli since I had told him that I 'sort of' wanted to study science and I 'sort of' wanted to travel. Here was my opportunity to do both on a grand scale, so since I had never disobeyed him he took it for granted that I was going, and since I adored him I wanted to please him. I was packed off to the Starfleet H.Q. Academy in San Francisco - my father never believed in doing anything by halves, and Ensign Alison Oswald, serial number SC932464C, was assigned to the science branch.

I was so shy that I made few friends. My father's small company manufactured specialised laboratory equipment - good stuff that lasted, and one of his biggest customers was the Vulcan Science Academy. There were a number of Vulcans at Starfleet, and Sarat was in my class. He was clever and graceful and disdainful, and oh, how I envied him! But he scared the hell out of me, as did all Vulcans. I admired them, but I feared their scorn and hated my own insignificance.

The Vulcan traders who came to do business with my father awed me to such an extent that I broke vital pieces of equipment, could not speak, could not think coherently; small wonder they thought me half-witted, a pitiful specimen of Humanity. But somehow at Starfleet I got by, as unconvinced as my family were adamant that being there would cure me of my neuroses once and for all.

Debriefing after a command test took quite some time. This test had been important for the cadets, as we were to be assigned to a ship for a training cruise. I was modestly setting my sights on a scientific research vessel, maybe Grissom, Reliant or Edison.

I knew that Sarat was aiming a little higher. He was hoping for Enterprise, Starfleet's darling.

I had seen Kirk once. The brash young Captain of the Enterprise had paid a flying visit to the Academy, his First Officer at his side.

At computer class, Spock was spoken of with great respect, and I had even attended his lecture. He was a Vulcan legend - no, a half Human/half Vulcan legend - still, nevertheless, not someone I was all that keen to serve under.

Many took my fear of Vulcans to be prejudice, but I think Sarat knew me better than that, and somehow... I know this sounds crazy, but I felt that if Spock knew of my fears he would have understood - and maybe even sympathised.

My tutors at the Academy had long recognised my handicap. It took a whole year before I plucked up the courage to answer a question in class. Oh, I knew the answers all right, I was just afraid of making a fool of myself. Sarat was surprisingly helpful, yet he still scared the living daylights out of me. I got the impression that he was going out of his way to be pleasant, though often patience was not enough, and diplomacy - never a strong point with Vulcans - would fly out of the window leaving me a shivering, tearful wreck. It never occurred to me that Sarat was badly in need of a friend, and as scared and insecure as I was. If I had cottoned

on sooner, it might have saved us both a lot of unnecessary heartbreak.

Sarat took his failure of the command test philosophically; there was always the next time. Commander Carey Ryan, who had been conducting the test, awarded me a 'B', top range grade, much to my surprise and muted delight, then the room dissolved into an expectant hush as he read out our assignments for the next three months.

I was not in the least surprised when Sarat was given Enterprise, and neither it seemed was he - after all, he was only getting what he deserved. At last it was down to me, and I held my breath, unconscious that I was doing so. Then my heart sank into my regulation boots, and I could feel the other cadets staring at me, wondering what I had done to merit such an honour.

Someone asked if I was okay, I was very pale, was something wrong?

Wrong? The bottom had just dropped out of my world.

I was going to Enterprise, too.

Docking Bay Six was a hive of activity. Figures darted here and there like demented bees, the gold and blue and red of their uniforms becoming one continual backwards and forwards motion of colour to my already disorientated state of mind. The clasp of my canvas grip dug into my shoulder and I hoisted it higher to relieve the pinching.

Sarat stood beside me, hands clasped behind his back, a small grip at his feet, watching the commotion with interest. He caught me looking at him, and his eyes widened a fraction.

"You will soon become accustomed to the change," he said in a much softer tone than I had ever heard him use.

Surprised, I let my hold on the canvas grip slacken, and it tumbled to the deck, the strap grazing my shoulder painfully. Feeling the red flush of inadequacy stain my cheeks, I bent down to retrieve it, but Sarat was already handing it to me and as I went to take it our fingers accidentally brushed, making me pull away, horrified, remembering that Vulcans disliked contact of any kind. Down went the grip again, and this time neither of us made any attempt to pick it up.

Guiltily, I stole a look at Sarat. His face was set and stony. Had he misread my motive for snatching my hand away? Perhaps he thought he was doomed to spend the voyage with a bigot.

I shrugged and said plaintively, "I'll never get used to this turmoil." Heavens, it sounded as if I was whining.

Sarat's eyes narrowed in distaste. "Are you going to be a coward all your life, Alison?"

It was the first time he had used my Christian name, and the realisation stunned me so much that all I could do was gape at him; then, embarrassed, I dropped my gaze to the fallen grip.

"I don't know," I concluded lamely.

Sarat sighed, and moved away.

Once in my quarters I stashed away what few belongings I had, and found that I was sharing with an Andorian, who had as yet not made an appearance. A duty sheet lay on my bunk, and I picked it up and studied it, skimming over the more obvious points and searching for my posting. I could study the whys and wherefores in more detail later, as the Enterprise was not due to leave drydock until 20.00 hours.

The instructions were precise, where to go, what to do, and I was not worried until I reached a sentence midway down the list and typed in red.

"18.30 hours: Interview with Commander Spock, annexe adjacent to officers' Lounge, 'C' deck."

Immediately I felt that familiar, nagging pain in my stomach, which only anxiety can bring. I bit my lip and scanned the list further; the pain rose to such a crescendo that I had to grip the side of my night table and lower myself to sit on the bunk.

"20.00 hours," I read, "report to navigation station on bridge."

Steeped in misery as I was, the coming to life of the ship's intercom system did not automatically gain my attention as it should have, and only after the officer operating the mechanism repeated herself for the third time did I realise that the instruction was meant for me.

"Lieutenant Oswald. Lieutenant Alison Oswald, please report to Dr. Leonard McCoy in sickbay."

At Starfleet orders are meant to be obeyed, and I knew from his reputation that Dr. McCoy did not like to be kept waiting. Slowly I got to my feet; the pain was ebbing, but it was a further five minutes before I could get my feet to obey my head. Then came a slightly irritated Southern drawl over the comm system, and I knew that I could be in big trouble. I have never moved so fast in my life as I did then.

18.20 hours found me nursing a cup of coffee in the main mess hall and trying to calm the butterflies fluttering about somewhere in the deepest recesses of my intestines. I searched among the groups gathered around the service counter, hoping to catch a glimpse of Sarat in their midst, but in vain.

I somehow found the familiar chaos of the mess hall comforting - something that Sarat detested, so that it seemed logical that he should avoid it. The fact that I was thinking about someone else ten minutes before the ordeal of facing the First Officer surprised me. For once, I had not been wallowing in my own fear and anxiety. At 18.23 I left the mess hall and made my way to the nearest turbo shaft. At 18.25 precisely I was outside the entrance to the Officers' Lounge on 'C' deck.

"Hello!" A bright faced, blonde Lieutenant greeted me from behind a table near the entrance to the annexe. She had a clipboard and writing stylus before her.

I straightened my tunic self-consciously. "Lieutenant Alison Oswald to see Commander Spock."

The confident ring in my voice sounded very false, even to me, but I do not think she noticed - or if she did, she let it pass without comment. The blonde girl consulted her clipboard.

"Oh yes, your appointment isn't until 18.30 hours. You're a few minutes early. Would you like to take a seat? The First Officer is engaged at present."

I felt like adding, "Congratulations," but instead perched on the edge of a chair and awaited my fate.

Finally a buzzer sounded at the entrance to the annexe and the Lieutenant smiled encouragingly at me. "Commander Spock will see you now."

Feeling rather like Daniel must have done on his way to the lions' den, I took a deep breath, knocked on the door, and waited.

"Enter."

The voice was deep and resonant, with a hint of warmth and the promise of humour - not at all the sort of voice I expected to be possessed by a Vulcan legend. The door slid open and I crossed the threshold. Strangely, I felt no fear, only a great desire to see this man as soon as possible.

Commander Spock rose from his chair as I entered, a gesture of old world courtesy he no doubt extended to all new junior officers in order not to make them feel intimidated. Nevertheless, the gesture touched me deeply and made me feel like a million credits.

He was taller than I'd expected - at least, taller and broader than Sarat; but then Sarat was just a boy, and Spock... well, Spock, though still young, would be termed middle aged by his Human counterparts. He could not be called handsome, but he had that alien quality about him that is so attractive to Human females. His eager intensity and graceful bearing, coupled with his delightful aura of self assurance, made him one of the beautiful people. It would not be hard to fall in love with Spock.

"Lt. Oswald?"

He made my name sound like something unique and precious, and in that moment I ceased to fear the legend completely and began to bear affection for the man behind it. Oh, nothing like the wild physical desire I had read about in books, but more like the love a niece has for her favourite uncle.

"Please sit down, Lieutenant," he invited, indicating a padded wall seat to the left of the desk; then instead of returning to his own chair he seated himself next to me, folded his arms, and subjected me to open appraisal.

I studied him likewise. The lines etched around his eyes and mouth suggested pain and patient suffering, but his eyes... Oh, his eyes shone with a deep wisdom, gentle intellect, acceptance - and yet he still seemed to be searching for something without which his life was as yet incomplete.

Quickly remembering that to stare was rude, I felt my face grow

hot and hastily looked away. Spock made no comment, but remained silent for a few minutes.

"I have briefly perused your Starfleet records," he said finally, "but would prefer for you to elaborate upon your early life, family history and so forth prior to your entering the Academy. Would you do that for me?"

He was being so nice to me that I would have done anything for him. My butterflies finally and miraculously evaporated. I nodded. "Yes, sir. Where would you like me to begin?"

"I think the beginning would be the most appropriate place, don't you, Lieutenant?" he replied with just the hint of a smile hovering on his lips.

I found myself telling him about my home and my family, how I was dominated and made to feel insignificant by my brothers. How I hated my shyness; how many times I had missed school through making myself sick with anxiety; how my parents despaired of me; how the Vulcan trader had inadvertently destroyed what little self-esteem I had left when I had broken the vital lab equipment he had just purchased; and how, as a last resort, my father had applied for my entry into Starfleet to cure me of my aversion to people, hoping the discipline would give me a little backbone.

Through all this Spock sat quietly while I rambled on, not interrupting, just listening while I poured out all my hopes and fears, nodding every now and then, encouraging me to go on as though he understood what I was feeling, and that I needed to talk it out. When I finally subsided into silence he leaned forward slightly and fixed me with that melted-chocolate gaze of his.

"How old are you, Alison?"

Again the use of my Christian name startled me. "I recently had my 20th birthday, sir, but if you've seen my Starfleet dossier then you already know that." I felt my colour rise again. The feeling of being at ease which this senior officer provoked was making me forget just who it was I was talking to.

Spock, however, chose to ignore my gaffe. "You are still very young, and may yet choose a different career if you feel that Starfleet is, after all, not for you."

"Oh no! I mean, no, sir. I couldn't imagine not being in Starfleet now. I've already learned so much, and there's still so much more to be learned about life, alien life, about survival, about the universe... the unknown."

"Enthusiasm is certainly not your problem, but the shyness which you and your tutors have mentioned could be a serious handicap."

My animation disappeared. Was he trying to tell me that Starfleet had no place for me?

He must have seen the horrified expression on my face because he continued in a reassuring tone, "Your grades are consistent and I am told that you work very hard. It is only the inability to communicate that holds you back. Communication with other crew members is vital aboard a starship - on any ship. A breakdown in communications often leads to misunderstandings; that is how wars are started. Talking, that is, communicating, can be a preventive

measure."

"Yes, sir, I see."

"You are your own person now, Alison. There are no older brothers to dominate and intimidate you. As an officer you will learn to give orders and accept them; you will be called upon to make decisions that you alone will be able to make."

I was not sure. I wished I had as much confidence in myself as it seemed Spock had. I had lived in the shadow of my brothers for so long that it would take a long time for me to find my equilibrium. There was also the fact that I felt ordinary, a nonentity among the cream of the Academy. The alien life forms, according to Federation policy, commanded respect and decency. How often had I wished for blue skin, or a pair of pointed ears, to merit the same treatment. I was tired of being nondescript, but my shyness prevented me from being anything else.

I voiced my thoughts to Spock, now somewhat reluctantly because I knew he would immediately class me under the heading 'invertebrate'.

"Commander Spock," I said slowly, "I am not sure I deserve the honour of serving the United Federation. My father is no galactic celebrity, my family are obscure. I spend day after day rubbing shoulders with the offspring of Federation Ambassadors, eminent scientists and researchers, the children of great and gallant Starfleet officers. I am well aware of my own insignificance. I am an ordinary Human being among a veritable melting pot of alien life." I sounded so sorry for myself that it was a miracle Spock had not found me out for the spineless jellyfish I was.

"Do you wish you could trade places?" The question was asked gently, and I thought with a certain amount of curiosity.

"Sometimes, yes. I'd like to be able to boast that my father has been decorated for this or that, that my grandfather was a Vice-Admiral, that my brother is Ambassador to no less than 27 alien civilisations."

Spock sighed softly. "Alison, we each have an important contribution to make in life. As yet what yours is to be is not quite clear, but your presence here is just as vital as that of any Ambassador's daughter. Each of us is only allotted a short space of time in which to make our mark. Use your time wisely and carefully, and do not wish for trivial or material items when you are greatly blessed with what you have already been given."

I shrugged, unconvinced by Spock's soft-soaping, yet I knew he was right, especially the part about making the most of what I had. The image of the First Officer receded even more. This man with his never-ending concern for others and the enigmatic sadness in his eyes had carved a niche in my heart.

"Do you know what your trouble is, Lieutenant?"

I nodded wearily. "Only too well. I am weak, and I'm a coward."

Spock made a sound that could have been a soft chuckle, but that was unlikely - Vulcans are not renowned for their sense of humour.

"You are nothing if not honest. You are also too hard on yourself, my child. You are a little underconfident, but confidence comes with experience. As for cowardice, I see no evidence of that in you. Your performance in the command test was more than adequate. Your only thought was to try and save your ship."

"Which was and always will be my first priority."

"Thinking of others first is the substance out of which good and reliable officers emerge. I am positive you will get through this voyage with flying colours, as the old Earth cliché goes."

"I will do the best I can, sir."

"Your best is all that is required, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir."

I rose to go, grateful for having had the opportunity to pour out all my doubts and fears. Why had I ever been scared of this man?

"One more thing before you go, Lieutenant. About Lt. Sarat..."

"Sarat?"

Spock nodded. "Yes, he is experiencing a little difficulty in adjusting to an environment practically devoid of Vulcans, and unfortunately prejudice rears its ugly head on the Enterprise, as it does elsewhere. Perhaps it would be a good idea if you kept him under observation."

"Sir?" I had an inkling of what Spock was getting at, but nevertheless wanted to be sure.

"Keep a watchful eye on him, Lieutenant."

I felt doubtful about that; the Vulcans at Starfleet never exactly went out of their way to seek one another's company.

"Commander, Sarat and I have never been on what you would call good terms."

"On the contrary, Lieutenant Sarat assures me that you have been the only one to extend any sort of friendship towards him."

"Oh!" I felt completely bowled over by the revelation. "I thought Vulcans did not allow friendships."

"In certain circumstances it is permissible. Are you still so very much afraid of what the Vulcan race represents?"

I smiled shyly at him. "Not any more." Spock raised his eyebrows in comprehension. "I shall take Sarat under my wing, sir, if he will let me."

"Good. You may even be able to help one another."

"How, Commander?"

"You can assist him in acclimatising to Humans, and he in turn can help rid you of your shyness."

I frowned suspiciously. "How?"

"In a thousand subtle Vulcan ways, Lieutenant."

Long after my conversation with Spock I deliberated that last point. Sarat subtle? About as subtle as an ahn-woon at a Vulcan wedding!

I tried to keep my word to Spock in all respects, but it was not easy. To be fair, the Sciences group were a great bunch who made sure I was not left out of any of their recreational activities, and my Andorian bunkmate turned out to be okay - a little gruff and abrupt at times, but I got used to her, just as I got used to being part of the Enterprise crew.

She was a lovely ship, beautifully and expertly maintained by Lieutenant-Commander Montgomery Scott, Head of Engineering, and as I soon found out, the pride and joy of all who served her from Captain Kirk right down to the most junior member of staff.

The past four years of theory appeared unreal as I settled to putting into practice what had been drummed into me in the classroom, and more important, becoming a part of the life force that was Enterprise.

I kept remembering how different Spock was from the stately figure I had observed through lowered eyelashes from the back of the lecture hall; then, he had only been a distant image of efficient brisk precision, and coldly clinical in his delivery of the highways and byways of computer technology. It seemed to me that I had been given a sneak preview of the man behind the Vulcan, and once I showed signs of adjusting to shipboard routine the Vulcan would take over, unobtrusively but determinedly.

As promised I looked out for Sarat, but it was not as easy as I had anticipated. Active duty combined with classes kept me pretty busy, and being on the bridge required 100% concentration, so there was little time for idle chatter.

In the meantime Sarat distanced himself from the other cadets, and I often felt Spock's questioning though unaccusing eyes upon me. He would be thinking that I was a disappointment to him, and he would be right. I could have found the time to talk to Sarat if I had really wanted to, and now I felt exceptionally guilty that I had made a promise which was yet to be fulfilled. Making time for Sarat was the least I could do for Spock after he had been so decent to me. Nevertheless, a month of the voyage had passed before I got round to tackling him.

Enterprise was headed for Macro Alpha, a class M world in the Copernican system. Once there our scientific expertise would be put to the test as in groups of 6 we would be beamed down to the planet's surface to collect and analyse data. In short, a landing party exercise.

Macro Alpha had been used for this purpose before, and apart from a colony of religious idealists there was hardly any animal life in existence, though the planet could hardly be called devoid of vegetation. The reason for such diversification in the evolution of flora and fauna was the fickle meteorological nature of the planet, which gave rise to the most appalling weather conditions imaginable,

so that the surface was frequently subjected to the adversity of violent electrical storms, drought, torrential rain and driving snowstorms, all depending of course on the season and the hemisphere, though both suffered equally from the instability of the weather.

The religious colony survived in their fortress of stone carved out of a cliff face by the Starfleet Corps of Engineers, and Federation ships visited the planet every three months to deliver supplies and medical aid, if any was needed. The colonists' needs were very simple, but the Order did include one or two meteorologists who studied the weather patterns and faithfully recorded their findings using equipment supplied by the Federation.

Macro was of no real use to the Federation, but it was bound by treaty to protect the interests of the colonists. Due to the variable weather conditions the planet was considered ideal for training exercises and manoeuvres during the course of which we never bothered the colony, or they us. As far as they knew the crews of the supply ships were the only living beings to visit their inhospitable world. They remained shut away in meditation or whatever, kept to the old calendar, and apart from the scientific equipment chose to exist in isolation as their Terran predecessors had 300 years previously.

I walked onto the rec deck after working a damned hard eight hour shift between the bridge, classes in survival technique and emergency first aid procedures. I had missed lunch, and was looking forward to grabbing a cup of coffee and a doughnut before getting down to work on my report for Spock on the navigational activities during my shift.

Sarat worked the same shift as I did, but he had left the bridge a few moments before me. He seemed to be avoiding me for some reason, and on the few occasions I had joined him at mealtimes in the main mess, he had been polite but cool, tolerating my presence but not desiring it. I had heard that some of the other cadets, not being able to tolerate his arrogance, were giving him a rough time, playing practical jokes on him and generally making his life a misery. (And I had thought I would be the only one to suffer!)

What galled them most was the fact that Sarat bore it all stoically and never once complained. When I eventually tackled him about it all he said was,

"It amuses them, and I am accustomed to the Human fear of inadequacy when confronted with the superior intellect of a Vulcan."

In the face of such immodesty I was not surprised he was having a hard time, and while half of me sympathised with what he was going through, the other half secretly believed that he deserved all he got.

At 14.00 hours the rec deck was fairly subdued, and I managed to secure my coffee and cookies (no doughnuts left!) without much hassle. I took a sip, burning my tongue in the process, and out of the corner of my eye spied Sarat sitting alone as usual, and being shunned, which was also the norm. Nobody takes kindly to a smart-ass Vulcan. Remembering my promise to Spock - and also because I felt sorry for Sarat - I crossed over to where he was sitting, somewhat gloomily I thought, skirting a group who were playing a simulated holograph battle game, and dodging an amorous young couple who seemed intent on pursuing one another.

I did not immediately park myself next to Sarat - with Vulcans you wait to be invited. When the invitation did not come, I decided to gatecrash.

"Is there anyone sitting here?"

I half expected him to inquire whether there was anything wrong with my eyesight, but he did not.

"The chairs are quite empty, Lieutenant."

I put my coffee cup on the table. "I was only being polite," I said defensively.

"Did you think I would be offended by your assuming that one of the seats is unoccupied? If all the chairs were occupied, then there would be a person now sitting in each one."

"It was only a simple question, Sarat - no need to make a big thing of it."

"It was a pointless question."

"Okay." I was becoming rather irritated. "Let me rephrase it. Could you use some company?"

"You Humans always judge others by your own standards. Vulcans do not hanker after trivial pursuits such as companionship, and since you ask me whether I desire it, it suggests that it is yourself who wishes it."

It took me a couple of seconds to digest that. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to insult you. May I sit here, then?"

"If you wish."

Wearily I sank into a chair. A conversation with Sarat actually tired me faster than eight hours hard work. We sat silently for a while as I finished my coffee and cookies and watched people come and go, racking my brains for something to say to Sarat. I had found conversing with Spock so easy and natural; how could two of the same race and culture be so different? Well, that was a simple one to answer. Spock had Human blood, too.

The silence was just becoming unbearable when Sarat spoke, quietly and hesitantly as though he was ashamed of the need to speak at all.

"We will reach Macro Alpha in a matter of hours."

I nodded and brushed some cookie crumbs off my knee. "18.3 hours, to be precise," I replied without thinking.

Sarat raised an eyebrow, and I shrugged, embarrassed. "Habit," I said with a nervous little laugh.

"It is possible that I will be senior officer in charge of one of the landing parties."

"Yes. I expect you're looking forward to that."

"It is an experience which I am anxious to avoid."

"Why? Characteristically, I am a little apprehensive, but I thought that you would be excited about... er, I mean, quite prepared for the experience."

He shuffled his feet under the table and looked every bit the boy he was; and in that moment I knew that he was probably the most vulnerable person on the ship.

"I hope you are chosen to be in my party, Alison."

I forced another laugh. "Oh, you wouldn't want that. I'd only get under your feet, and whine, and make a complete fool of myself as usual."

"At least I could be certain that you would follow orders. Others are disinclined to do so when they are given by a Vulcan."

"How do you know? Commander Spock is very highly thought of."

"He is different, and deservedly respected among Humans."

But not by Vulcans, I thought.

"I am not liked, Alison, and that will make leadership difficult."

"Come on, Sarat, don't you think you're jumping the gun a little? We're not due at Macro Alpha until after 20.00 hours tomorrow, and won't be beaming down until the day after. We've no way of knowing what Captain Kirk will decide."

Sarat looked at me, a penetrating stare which had me squirming in discomfort. "You have changed," he said. "Previously it was I who had to urge you into a better frame of mind. Now it is you who seeks to comfort me."

"Maybe shipboard life agrees with me," I answered, suddenly realising that it did. "I've had to stand on my own two feet since boarding the Enterprise, and I've found that giving and receiving orders is no big deal after all. The responsibility has done me good." That, and knowing I had an ally in Spock - but Sarat didn't know that.

He nodded thoughtfully, then said briskly, "Would you care for a game of chess?"

"I'm the worst player in Starfleet, you know that. But what the hell - the practice will do me good."

I watched as Sarat set up the game, thankful that I had not taken his rebuff seriously, but had taken the opportunity to talk to him properly. And what had I found out? That he probably felt more scared and insecure than I did. I also discovered that I had begun to like him very much.

Sarat was right in thinking that he would be officer in charge of one of the landing parties when we got to Macro Alpha. It was not a spectacular planet by any means. Smaller than Earth, it spun on its axis in a haze of blue, green and yellow, and looking at it on the bridge viewscreen I thought it appeared uninviting - or at least, as reluctant to welcome us as we were to set foot upon it.

Our assignments were handed out the morning after we had executed a standard orbit - 'parking orbit', we cadets called it. We had more or less developed slang terms for practically all the technical jargon, mainly because the technical stuff was so difficult to remember, but when Kirk or Spock were present on the bridge the correct terms were always applied. It was strange, but highly commendable, that all the cadets seemed very anxious to do their best for Kirk. Regulation boots were bright and sparkling from endless polishing, uniforms were spotless, hair immaculate and efficiency unwavering.

On the morning of the landing party exercise I was exempt from bridge duties, as was Sarat. I breakfasted alone, needing some time to give myself a good talking-to about faint heartedness and all that reluctance that was oh-so-familiar to me. Up until now I had been cocooned inside the ship, and was not looking forward to the severing of the umbilical cord which attached me to the reassuringly safe environment of the Enterprise.

After breakfast I returned to my quarters, and just to keep my mind occupied, sorted my laundry. A tunic, two pairs of pantyhose and some underwear found their way into the laundry chute, and I fervently hoped that the same garments would be returned safely to me at the end of the sanitizing process. Everything was marked with name, rank and serial number, though sometimes mistakes had been known to occur - muscular security guards had been known to curse the laundry system for issuing them with figure-hugging female apparel and dark pantyhose.

I checked the chronometer - 09.30 hours, and I had to report to the transporter by 10.15. I picked up a hairbrush and began to drag it through my hair. Being Titian red in colour - and straight as a die - it went well, or so I thought, with the silver-grey uniform which cadets wore, though I longed for the day when I would graduate to the blue of an officer in the Sciences department.

Each department was identifiable by colour. Gold was for Command, blue for Science and Medical, red for Engineering and Ship's Services. Sleeve braid indicated rank, while the shape of the insignia on the left of the tunic or shirt identified the ship. Sarat, understudying Captain Kirk, wore Captain's stripes on the sleeves of his grey shirt, and for the duration of our service on the Enterprise all we cadets were permitted to wear her arrowhead insignia.

At last the chronometer told me that it was time I made a move to keep the rendezvous in the transporter room. One important lesson I had learned at Starfleet was that being at the appointed place at the right time was preferable, because if you missed some vital piece of information through late attendance, not only did it earn you a demerit mark from an irritable officer who was disinclined to repeat himself, but you also ran the risk of putting yourself and other crewmembers in danger. My timekeeping had vastly improved since joining the Enterprise, and thankfully my demerits were few and far between.

I was first to arrive in the transporter room on 'B' deck, so had a few private moments in which to scan mentally the list of fellow officers who were accompanying me on the expedition to this hostile world.

Lt. N'Ranga was on his second training cruise, and was considered by us first-timers to be an old hand. Four years my

senior, N'Ranga had done his initial training at the Starfleet Academy branch in Nairobi, and had recently decided that he wanted to study medicine, so on returning to Earth he would be abandoning his classmates for a years primary grounding at a civilian hospital before resuming his career at Starfleet - a sort of sabbatical.

Lt. Jinja was a different prospect altogether. A native of the planet Argelius II, his presence aboard the Enterprise was something of an experiment. His people had a reputation for being irresponsible pleasure seekers, though Jinja's comparatively short time at Starfleet had brought him a certain sense of realisation that there was more to life than just having a good time. No-one expected too much of him, therefore he was under considerably less pressure than the rest of us, but Jinja knew his limitations and kept within them. Only his genetic make-up was responsible for the occasional lapse into his fun-loving ways, but mercifully these lapses were infrequent, and only occurred on occasions like birthday parties, the end of examinations, and the anniversary of the formation of the Federation.

Lt. Santiago Fortuna, who had once refused the position of Security Chief, was a Starfleet veteran who was on his last cruise.

"A Federation starship is no place for a married man with three kids," he had said, and so he was resigning his commission and returning to Brazil to help his brother run the family coffee plantation. Still lacking in finance, Brazil continued to be considered as undeveloped in the 23rd century as it had in the 20th - few cared for the climate, the miles of uncultivated vegetation and the dozens of large cities that had sprung up regardless. Education had improved, but the poverty level had not.

Santiago had originally left Brazil to find a better lifestyle for himself; now he was returning to fulfil family obligations, leaving his eldest son at Starfleet. By doing so he could be sure that at least one of his children could be certain of a future. The youngest child was just 18 months old, and Fortuna had never seen his youngest son, so perhaps the time had come, after all, to quit the service. And probably there would be more children, as the contraception laws did not apply in the still predominantly deeply religious Roman Catholic Brazil. Elsewhere the laws were stringent, for the growth of world and galactic population was being constantly monitored.

Ensign Gregory Carver, also from Security, hailed like me from one of the many Boston suburbs. A tall, muscular, blond, handsome, easy-going sort of boy, Greg had been more or less forced into a military career by his father, and the young man had complied, feeling indebted to his parents for all the money and effort they had lavished on him. Sensitive and artistic, Greg kept himself to himself for the most part, and spent his leisure hours painting and sketching in the company of a melodramatic young subaltern who was on the medical staff.

Greg's sexual preferences were no-one's business but his own, though other people thought differently. I kept an open mind, especially after hearing the rumours concerning James Kirk and Spock's close relationship. Personally I did not believe them, and I think it was an insult to both Spock and Captain Kirk to even imply that the friendship was anything but that. As for Greg, he was a friendly boy who had come to seek me out upon his arrival at the Academy, glad to be in touch with someone from home - not that I saw him all that often, our timetables and courses were different, and

then there was the shyness problem.

Which left Sarat and myself.

The others arrived as I was testing the weight of a canvas holdall containing emergency food rations and specimen envelopes and containers. Dr. McCoy was yet to supply the basic first aid 'just in case' kit, and thermal blankets. Satisfied that I would not be lagging behind after the first mile I turned my attention to checking the hardware, slipping my communicator and phaser onto my belt and setting my tricorder on 'geo' rather than 'physio'.

N'Ranga and Jinja were in a lighthearted mood, and the two Security people wore their usual blank expressions. The transporter chief leaned over the console and informed us that the latest meteorological report showed stable weather.

"Some cloud," he said, "but it's nice and warm down there at the moment."

Sarat had not spoken, but he was busy checking his phaser; when he had snapped it on his belt he lifted his head to meet my gaze. He pretended indifference, but something in his eyes told me otherwise.

"Sarat..." I began, but I was interrupted by the soft 'whoosh' of an opening door.

"... hope you know what you're doing," McCoy was saying, indicating that he had come to the end of a lengthy tirade.

Spock wore a look of patient suffering, especially reserved for the doctor - the feuding between the two was legendary, but we all knew they held each other in high regard.

McCoy handed me the medical supplies and blanket, which I added to the holdall. N'Ranga carried a similar one, since we were to be split into two groups. It did not look as if Jinja was going to have full rein this time.

"You have 4 hours and 30 minutes in which to complete the exercise," Spock said. "Keep in constant contact with the ship, and if any problem arises which you find you cannot possibly deal with yourselves, you must report to me immediately."

"Yes, sir," we dutifully chorused.

"Lt. Sarat, your group will consist of Lt. Oswald and Ensign Carver."

Sarat inclined his head silently.

"Lt. N'Ranga, you will be accompanied by Lt. Jinja and Lt. Fortuna."

"Thanks a lot!" I heard N'Ranga murmur, referring to Jinja.

"At the end of the given period you will report to Lt. Sarat at the beamup point, as he is your duty officer for the expedition."

I glanced at Sarat, but his eyes refused to meet mine. He stared ahead, face set, expression stony.

"I wish you a profitable and instructive day," Spock concluded.

"Happy hunting," McCoy added encouragingly.

I hoisted the holdall onto my shoulder and found that the strap needed adjusting. I was just about to return it to the deck when I felt warm, strong fingers complete the task for me. I looked straight into the First Officer's face, and felt the familiar red stain suffuse my cheeks.

"Is that quite comfortable, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, thank you, sir." I tried to smile.

"Remember, no more is expected of you than what you are able to give, and from observing you on this voyage I believe your ability to be adequate."

I scrambled self-consciously onto the transporter platform, and took my place between Sarat and Greg Carver.

"Energise," Spock said.

His voice was the last thing I heard, his reassuring countenance the last thing I saw, before the transporter room merged with the tired, weatherbeaten foliage and the sunbaked earth that was Macro Alpha.

We had been tramping through the undergrowth for about an hour, taking readings and filling specimen envelopes, yet we had hardly spoken to one another. Greg had made one or two attempts to lighten the atmosphere, but had been quickly silenced by a frozen stare from Sarat.

My feelings at the start of this mission had been of apprehension, quickly transformed to irritation directed at Sarat. He was at his most anti-social, and was busy playing the part of Efficient Science Officer, which Greg found instantly amusing.

"Hey, Lieutenant," he said jocularly, "there's nothing in regulations which states that we have to treat this expedition like a Sunday school outing."

Sarat, without even bothering to turn his head, just kept on walking. "I was not aware that you were here to enjoy yourself, Ensign. If that is your purpose, I suggest you think carefully about your future in Starfleet."

Suitably squashed, Greg fell into step beside me. "Full of self-importance, isn't he? Arrogant son-of-a-bitch!"

"Don't be too hard on him," I panted. "It's all bravado, though being Vulcan he'd never admit it. Believe it or not, beneath that shell he's built around himself, he's okay."

Carver looked sceptical. "I'll take your word for it," he said unconvincingly. "Look, I'm going on ahead - not too far, though, so I'll wait for you." And relaying his intentions to Sarat he sprinted away through the trees.

It was hot, very hot, and the dry red clay dust through which we were walking rose in small clouds and settled over everything when disturbed by our footsteps. I cast a glance skywards; thunderclouds

were gathering ominously in the distance and the heat had become so oppressive that I found it hard to breathe. I wiped the perspiration from my forehead with the back of my hand, and left a smear of the red clay there. My feet were aching, and the holdall had grown heavier during the last couple of miles.

Wearily I trudged on after Sarat as the sky continued to darken and the first thunderclap growled threateningly not too far away.

"Sarat!" I called. "Can't we rest for a moment? We've been walking practically non-stop for nearly an hour, and this heat is stifling. And I'm not whining," I added. "It's a perfectly reasonable request."

Sarat halted and waited for me to catch up. "I am accustomed to fiercer heat than this, so it does not bother me. It slipped my mind that Humans prefer a cooler climate."

That was it, no apology, just reminding me of my inadequacies.

"Boston isn't exactly ShiKahr," I said sarcastically.

Sarat chose to ignore that and pulled out his communicator. "Sarat to Enterprise."

"Spock here."

I turned my back on him while he made his report, and watched the storm clouds gather in the distance. The thunder still rolled around the sky and there was the occasional flash of lightning, blue-white, beautiful and dangerous. I lowered the holdall to the ground, remembering that there was still some data to collect, and wondered how the other group was faring. From the direction Greg had taken I could hear the low murmur of running water coupled with the crackle of static from Sarat's communicator. The weather was affecting transmission, but Sarat was reassuring the First Officer that it would be a long time before the storm really broke, and we would have ample time to complete the exercise. I was not so sure.

And back on the Enterprise, as I learned later, Spock sat at the con unwilling to interfere in what was, after all, Sarat's decision, but repeated scanning of the surface had shown deteriorating weather conditions, and Spock, ever mindful of the life preservation edict, was concerned about the well-being of his as yet untried crewmen. I also learned later that it was his confidence in our common sense that led to his decision to let us get on with it. At the time he could not possibly have known that the weather would worsen even beyond his wildest imaginings.

"Shall we continue?"

I picked up the holdall, and then began to laugh at the picture my Vulcan companion presented. Sarat's immaculately groomed dark hair was covered with a thin layer of red clay dust, and when I pointed it out to him he retorted,

"At least you have the advantage of having hair almost the same colour."

I glared at him, for the colour of my hair was a sore point, having been called 'Carrots' and 'Red' during my childhood by my brothers.

He added, "Titian red has always been one of my favourite colours - it brings to mind the fiery blaze of a Vulcan sunset."

I blushed uncomfortably. "I wasn't aware that poetic description was one of your strong points!" and stalked on ahead, relieved to see Greg Carver waving at us from the top of a rise. He was shouting something about a river, and as we headed towards him the first heavy drops began to fall.

By the time Sarat and I had been reunited with Greg the steady patter of raindrops had turned into a downpour, and the red clay, which only moments before had parched our throats, had metamorphosised into a sea of dank-smelling mud; it sucked at our boots, and threatened to adhere us to where we stood if we did not move soon.

"Isn't there somewhere we can shelter until this rain eases off?"

I had to shout to make myself heard above the persistent flashes of lightning and answering claps of thunder, which had come ominously closer in a short time. It never occurred to any of us that we should contact the Enterprise and simply beam up, though we soon discovered that even that option was no longer open to us.

"Looks like it's on for the day." Greg also had to raise his voice in reply. "I've tried to get in touch with N'Ranga and the others," he indicated his communicator, "but all I get is static."

"Atmospherics," I spluttered, spitting strands of wet hair out of my mouth. "If they've any sense, they'll have beamed back aboard the Enterprise by now."

Greg adjusted the strap of his tricorder. "And maybe it would be wise for us to follow suit." He shot a pointed look at Sarat.

"I am afraid that could prove a little difficult, Ensign," Sarat replied calmly, his immaculate hairstyle dishevelled and plastered to his skull by the rain.

"How come?"

"I have lost contact with the Enterprise. It would appear that the bad weather conditions are having an adverse effect upon our communications."

"In other words, we're stuck here."

"I believe that is what I implied."

"Look," I broke in, "the logical alternative is to find shelter until the worst of this is over."

"Yeah, I agree," Greg said irritably. "C'mon, there's a cliff down by that river - there may be some caves, or an overhang where we can shelter, and Sarat can keep buzzing the Enterprise."

"I fully intend to do so..."

"Right!" I snapped. "Let's go before you two kill one another." And I started off down the incline with the others in pursuit.

Thinking back, it was probably stupid of me to go charging off like that, but I suppose that deep down I knew the other two had no choice but to follow me; and besides, I had got rather tired of their petty squabbling by then.

The river was a good deal further away than I had at first anticipated, but it was obvious that the water was already rising, and the musical tinkling we'd heard earlier had quickly transformed into a menacing roar, which led me to believe that the river was served by a variety of tributaries, though not being a geography major I could not be sure. As we got nearer I could see that the river bank was already turning into a sea of mud, and that the water had taken on a greyish hue. Flecked with foam, it roared downstream to some unknown destination, carrying along with it washed-out looking scrub and tired vegetation.

The storm was right above us now, the rain pouring from a leaden sky occasionally lit by flashes of lightning. It was hard to keep my balance on the muddy river bank, and my eyes scanned the terrain for some form of shelter. Sarat kept on trying to contact the Enterprise, but without success.

"You may as well give up, at least for now," I remarked, hitching the holdall higher onto my shoulder and nearly ending up on my face in the mud in the process. Sarat reached out a hand and steadied my elbow, but I snatched it away sulkily.

"If we can't contact them, surely it stands to reason that they're in the same boat!" I snapped. I was wet, angry, and the holdall, heavy to begin with, now felt as though I was carrying the whole of the Enterprise's science equipment with me, digging into my flesh, the pain making me irritable, the rain trickling down the back of my neck making me more so.

Be fair, I told myself sternly, the others are suffering just as much discomfort.

Sarat, used to higher temperatures and looking distinctly miserable, suppressed a shiver, and my heart went out to him in contrition, ashamed of myself for being so ungrateful as to shrug off his offer of help.

Greg, standing above us, was pointing at something and shouting to make himself heard over the roaring water which was doing its best to compete with the thunder.

"There... caves... shelter..." was all I could make out.

I tossed him the holdall, then he gripped my wrists, and with much slipping and sliding I made it to the top of the bank, standing quiet and breathless for a second in the shelter of Greg's arms. Sarat in the meantime was fiddling with his communicator.

Greg leaned forward and shouted at him. "Come on, Sarat - the sooner we get out of this rain the better. You'll have all the time in the world to play with your damned communicator then." He held out his hand and Sarat, replacing the device on his belt, made to

grab it.

The river was now at the same level as the bank Sarat stood upon, and I watched in horror as what had been solid ground crumbled and was swallowed up by the swirling water. The bank disappeared before my eyes - and took Sarat with it.

I screamed something, I don't know what, then started to run downriver, following the struggling bedraggled figure which was being carried forever onwards. Every now and then I caught sight of the Vulcan's pale visage above the water as he tried to swim against the current - the river had widened, and in some places was shallower.

Greg, who had been following hard on my heels, grabbed my arm. "Look!" he hissed.

The current was dragging Sarat towards some rocks, and in seconds he lay trapped between two boulders, the strap of his tricorder wedged and holding him there, but for how long was debatable. The current was so strong that he might be torn free at any moment. In the meantime he lay there, a splash of colour in the grey water, silent and ominously still.

To my right I spied a tree thick with long vines, and an idea began to form in my feverish mind. Reaching for my phaser I adjusted it accordingly and aimed it at the tree. Greg, hitching onto my plan, did likewise, and soon a pile of the vines lay at our feet. We quickly knotted them together, then Greg tied one end of the makeshift rope to the tree, and the other was secured tightly around my waist. Being the stronger, Greg would remain on land to haul us in, while I swam out to Sarat.

Determinedly I waded out towards the stranded Vulcan; in no time the water reached my waist, and then I found myself swimming hard against the fast-flowing current. I could feel the resistance of the vine rope around my waist, and just prayed it would not snap.

Sarat, when I reached him, appeared to be dead, so I quickly checked for a pulse by placing icy fingers to his carotid artery. Amazingly, as I did so he opened his eyes and said weakly,

"You took your time."

"Damned ungrateful Vulcan!" I retorted, relief at finding him alive illogically turning into anger at his feigned ingratitude. Using all my strength I began to try to pull him free of the boulders which trapped him. It took some effort on my part as Sarat was too weak to help, and as I worked I noticed a bad gash on his right leg, through which poked the jagged end of a bone.

I must have hurt him while I pulled and tugged at his helpless body, though he never complained once. At last, though, he was free, and while I kicked as hard as I could against the current Greg hauled us in.

It seemed like a lifetime before we finally made it safely to the river bank. Sarat was in a bad way, cold and in shock from loss of blood and his unexpected freezing dip; he lay on the bank shivering and coughing weakly while I chafed his hands to try and get the circulation going.

"We've got to get him out of this rain," Greg said.

"If we carry him back upriver we could find our way back to those caves you pointed out. The leg is broken, but mercifully no artery has been severed; he should be okay until I can get some bandages and stuff out of the holdall..." I clapped my hand to my mouth in horrified realisation.

Greg squinted at me in the rain. "What is it?"

"The holdall - I just left it when Sarat fell in the river."

"Don't worry, it should still be there. I doubt if the river's got that high yet."

Making a fourhanded seat, we eventually and with much difficulty managed to manoeuvre Sarat into a sitting position; he was feeling dizzy and sick, but managed to place his arms around our shoulders for support.

"Don't you dare pass out on me!" I puffed, keeping a firm grip on Greg's forearms.

"I shall endeavour not to," Sarat replied in a flat, tired voice, and I had to smile, for despite his pain and our present dilemma the Vulcan still somehow managed to maintain a sense of dignity.

Slowly, and with frequent stops to regain our breath, we finally reached the point at which Sarat had fallen into the river. From there it was only a few minutes to the caves, but with the burden of the injured Vulcan, those few minutes became almost an hour.

The cave Greg chose was relatively dry, and once we had deposited Sarat gently on the ground he returned to the river's edge to retrieve the holdall containing our medical supplies. Meanwhile I divested Sarat of his wet clothing, then recalling survival training I found my phaser and pointed it at a nearby boulder. The glowing red rock provided instant heat, and I moved around in a cloud of steam as my clothes began to dry.

Sarat was barely conscious, but he still coughed and shivered, giving the occasional involuntary moan of pain. Being aware of the Vulcan code of discipline, I was embarrassed at having to witness the shame of his weakness. I knew he would probably prefer to suffer alone, but I could not leave him - to hell with Vulcan honour for once. Green blood had begun to congeal around the leg wound, and it reminded me of the recent command test. I had not been able to save Sarat in simulation, so what made me think I could keep him alive now?

I knelt down beside him and brushed the wet hair from his face. Sarat opened his eyes and tried to summon up his Vulcan indifference by adopting a scolding frown, but he did not quite make it.

"How do you feel?" I asked - a stupid question, I know. He looked terrible, but with Vulcanoids looks can be deceptive, and I really had to know his true condition.

He coughed and grimaced. "There have been occasions when I have felt better."

"Is there much pain?"

He blinked in acknowledgement. "Were I not so weak I could adopt the Vulcan healing trance, but I am so cold, and so weary."

"The Vulcan healing trance cannot mend a broken bone," I said gently.

"Where is Ensign Carver?"

"He's gone to find our medical box of tricks. There's a thermal blanket which will provide you with insulation, and as long as our phasers hold out we can keep heating the rocks."

"What are my injuries?"

"I'm no expert, but as far as I can see you've swallowed about a gallon of dirty water, you're suffering from shock, and you've a fractured right tibia."

"An excellent diagnosis, Doctor," he remarked drily as he winced in pain once again.

Helplessly I knelt there, for until Greg returned there was nothing much I could do. I turned my head towards the entrance, but all I could see was the slanting rain which seemed heavier than before.

"I lost my phaser and tricorder," Sarat mumbled worriedly, the realisation really seeming to bother him.

"I expect the armoury will forgive you under the circumstances," I quipped, slipping my fingers round his wrist to find a pulse - it was sluggish, and his skin icy beneath my touch.

Making my mind up I crossed over to his uninjured side and lay down close beside him, my head resting on his shoulder, my arm across his chest.

"Don't take this personally, Sarat," I said in what I hoped was a business-like fashion, "but I intend to be the substitute for that thermal blanket for the time being."

"The pleasure is entirely mine," he muttered drowsily, then amazingly I felt his arm around me drawing me closer to him.

"You're going to hate yourself later," I pointed out.

"Thermal blankets are not supposed to answer back," he whispered.

If I didn't know better, I would have sworn that Sarat was enjoying the situation.

I lay there listening to the growling thunder, the pouring rain, and Sarat's uneven breathing. I did not begin to flatter myself by thinking this was due to my proximity, but I did think it odd that only few weeks ago he had terrified me, and now here we were in a compromising position on the floor of a cave, partially clothed. I let out a snort of laughter, but managed to stop myself becoming hysterical.

Keep your head, Alison, I told myself firmly, and wriggled closer to the Vulcan, whose grip on me had not loosened. I lifted my head and looked at him.

Well, Sarat, I thought, the boot is on the other foot now, and you need me as much as I'm supposed to need you. But in what capacity do I need you? I've done all right for myself on board the Enterprise, though I guess I still need you to chivvy me along, to encourage me, to push me into doing things - because let's face it, without someone in the background I'm a lump of spineless jelly; and you need me because someone has to care what happens to you. Well, I do care... but I think you know that, don't you?

It was not an unpleasant thought.

I must have dozed off, because the next thing I knew Greg was back, eyebrows raised sardonically at the sight of Sarat and me huddled together on the floor.

Carefully I eased myself away and went to relieve him of the holdall; it was soaking wet, but mercifully the contents were still dry. I extracted the tinfoil type thermal sheet, and with much caution we managed to position it under and around the Vulcan's body. It was then that Greg produced two flat pieces of wood.

"Splints," he explained. "We've got to immobilise that leg."

After a brief search I found a dressing pad and some bandages, and together we did the best we could to make Sarat comfortable without causing him too much pain. He was conscious again, his eyes over-bright, his body in the throes of some ague; we engulfed him in the silver blanket and reheated the rocks.

"Can't we give him something?" Greg asked as I set rainwater to boil in a makeshift billy which in reality was a tall specimen jar.

"There's only propoxyphene hydrochloride," I replied, "but as he's still in shock I don't think we should risk giving it to him. Besides, I'm not familiar enough with Vulcan physiology to even start feeding him drugs."

"You seemed to be doing okay." Greg could not resist the opportunity to remark upon what he had seen.

"I was trying to keep him warm to reduce shock. As a Security officer you should be quite familiar with the rules and regulations concerning survival technique. Bodies huddling together have been known to save a few lives."

I didn't intend to justify myself even to him, but it came out sounding exactly as though I needed to explain my actions. "You can think what you like," I added, "but that's all it was."

"You're fond of him though, aren't you, Alison?"

For a moment I did not reply, just focused my attention on the bubbling water, then I nodded slowly. "Yes, I suppose I am."

"Don't waste your time and your feelings on someone who doesn't know what they mean, and doesn't care to know."

I poured water onto powdered coffee in two styrofoam beakers and handed one to Greg. "I don't know what rumours have been circulating on the ship's grapevine about me, and I'm not particularly bothered, but let me get one thing straight. I am not stupid. I may be other

things, but I'm not naive enough to fall in love with someone who has been brought up to find any form of emotion distasteful. Thanks for the advice, but I didn't ask for it, and I don't remember trying to tell you how to conduct *your* love life, either."

This effectively silenced Greg, who gave me a meaningful look and went to stand by the cave entrance, while I broke open a packet of rusks and dunked one unceremoniously in my coffee, then scrabbled around for my communicator, sat cross-legged on the floor, and attempted to contact the Enterprise.

Minutes seemed to have become hours, but looking back our confinement on Macro Alpha could not have been very long. Fatigue and anxiety coupled with exposure can play strange tricks on tired bodies and pondering minds.

During the late afternoon the rain eased off a little, as did the storm, which was reassuring. The river had continued to rise, and the water level had risen to a point just below where we were sheltering. Atmospherics were still hampering contact with the ship.

Greg and I had not spoken for some time. He had declined more coffee, so for want of something to do I packed and repacked the holdall. I did get the impression that he was angry with me for some reason - probably because timid little Alison Oswald had dared to stand up for herself, but since he did not pursue the topic neither did I.

I felt certain that the weather would ease up soon, and that we would be picked up by the Enterprise - if Kirk's reputation was anything to go by, he would not let the grass grow under his feet. Yet I could not erase the sense of guilt I felt over Sarat's accident. I had promised Spock that I would keep an eye on him, and I had failed even in that simple task, though part of me argued that it had not been fair of Spock to ask that I should assume responsibility for Sarat - he had, after all, a very strong will of his own. I let out a heartfelt sigh; I was beginning to feel very sorry for myself.

Sarat stirred, and I was instantly by his side. Some of his colour had returned, but his eyes were still fever bright with pain. He tried to free his hands from the folds of the thermal blanket, but lacked the strength to do so, therefore contented himself with merely gazing at me. I was very aware of Greg watching us from the cave entrance.

"Forgive me," Sarat croaked.

"What for?" I whispered fiercely. Not understanding, I was convinced that he was delirious.

"I have failed," he said forlornly. "I am a Vulcan, and I am so ashamed."

"Don't talk nonsense," I replied briskly. "You haven't failed anyone. Vulcans aren't immune to accidents, you know, neither do they have the monopoly."

"You don't understand." And he closed his eyes once more.

"No, I don't," I muttered, moistening his cracked lips with cool

boiled water, "but I wish I did."

Greg's voice broke me out of my reverie, and as I moved to join him I noticed that the rain had stopped and the thunder was rolling away in the distance once more. And would you believe it - a weak, pale sun was doing its best to break free of the retreating storm clouds.

We burst into relieved laughter, grudges forgotten, and hugged each other. At about the same time we heard the hum of the transporter - the cavalry had arrived.

Captain Kirk, Spock, Dr. McCoy, the young medic Brian Mooney and two security officers materialised onto the soggy marshland the advancing water had created, and matters were very soon taken out of our hands. I stood quietly to one side while the doctor examined Sarat, then efficiently whisked him away to a waiting bed in sickbay.

I watched while Greg Carver and Brian Mooney silently devoured each other with their eyes, each pledging his love for the other, Mooney's relief more than obvious that Greg was unhurt. Their emotion was so restrained yet so intense that it was beautiful to watch, and I averted my face, the tears forming, embarrassed at intruding upon a very private moment. There was no-one on board the Enterprise who would jubilantly welcome me back. Self pity overwhelmed me, and I am ashamed to say I wept, though I suppose relief had a lot to do with it.

Half blinded by tears I stumbled away, only to be confronted by Spock. Never have tears fallen so fast and so bitterly as mine did then. Weeks of keeping up a facade had finally taken their toll, and I cried - for myself, for Sarat, and the respect I felt sure I had lost through my childish desire to take refuge in tears.

Amazingly, I saw hands reach out, felt warm arms envelope me, and I remained encircled within his warmth, secure in my mind that nothing would ever frighten me again, until reality intruded, and mortified by my show of emotion I pulled myself free from the sanctuary of his embrace.

Sensing my withdrawal Spock gently but firmly put me from him, and when I dared sneak a look at him he nodded at me with an expression of perfect comprehension, and instinctively I knew that the Vulcan within him was kind.

I also noticed that I had muddied his uniform.

I grabbed the holdall and allowed myself to be led to the beamup point. As I felt myself engulfed by the beam I began to wonder how much longer I could endure this life of total dedication and discipline to which I had devoted myself. Perhaps Sarat was right; maybe I was a coward... Then the lovely feeling I had experienced in Spock's protective embrace returned, and I knew that as long as confidence in me like that existed, I could go on forever.

I caught a chill, a stupid trivial ailment which kept me confined to my bunk for three days, and believe it or not the weather on Macro Alpha remained fairly stable for the other landing parties to complete their exercises unhampered. I also found out that our cave had been less than a mile from the religious colony, which was ironic, really, but neither one of us in our dilemma had recollected

that there was a colony at all.

I had few visitors save the medical staff, and Greg, who had also been to see Sarat and told me he was coming along 'in leaps and bounds', figuratively speaking. I confided in Greg that my chill seemed to be a symbol of my physical and spiritual weakness, and that I was becoming increasingly worried that Starfleet was not, after all, for me.

"And I suppose you blame yourself for what happened to Sarat, and think you were responsible for the bad weather too," he said scornfully. "Grow up, Alison. Hasn't it occurred to you that if you hadn't gone into the river after him Sarat wouldn't be alive right now? Your only problem is a bad case of underconfidence. A few more experiences like that should knock that out of you, but you weren't scared at the time, were you?"

"No," I agreed, "I didn't think twice about it. All that mattered was that we should get Sarat to safety."

"And he would have done the same thing, and so would I."

"Would you, Greg?"

"Yes, I would, Alison. Part of Starfleet's job is to preserve life, but it goes deeper than that. I'd like to think you'd save my life because I'm your friend, not because I'm a statistic in an Article of the Federation."

What he said made sense, and reassured, I told him what had passed between Spock and myself when I'd first come aboard the Enterprise.

"Commander Spock wouldn't have entrusted you with such a task if he didn't have complete faith in you."

"But I feel I've let him down," I wailed.

"Nonsense. Has he told you so? Of course not, because it isn't true. Sarat is alive, and what happened on Macro Alpha could have happened to any one of us. Y'know, you and Sarat are very alike, both with a handicap. Yours is underconfidence, his is insecurity. Yet he boosts your confidence, though you don't know it, and you make him feel secure. There's only been one other Human/Vulcan relationship like that."

I knew instantly to whom he was referring, but where Sarat and I were concerned it was slightly different.

Greg rose to go. "You can leave Starfleet or you can stay," he said, "but I know which decision would disappoint both of Them, and leave you wondering for the rest of your life if you'd done the right thing."

"If you are determined to move your bishop, then my queen will take your king on my next move," Sarat said reasonably.

"You're always doing that," I grumbled.

He raised a questioning eyebrow.

"Anticipating my moves."

"That is because you are such a bad player," he commented without malice, and since it was the truth I could not argue with it. I shrugged my shoulders and pushed over my king.

"I concede."

"Defeatist!" Sarat mocked.

"Computer brain!" I retorted good humouredly.

We both lapsed into a companionable silence, and after a while I removed the chess set before returning to perch on the end of the bed.

"How's the leg?"

"It can bear my full weight now." Sarat looked pleased, and wiggled the toes that peeped out from the light cast which encased the limb. "Though it is doubtful as to whether I shall be returning to active duty before we return to Earth."

I leaned over and tapped the cast tentatively. "It won't be the same on the bridge without you."

"Your duty should be your first concern, therefore my presence is immaterial."

I traced patterns on the bedcover with my finger and said nothing. I knew Sarat was watching me, and that my actions irritated him, just as my silence did and always had.

Suddenly I found my hand trapped beneath one of his, his warm fingers intertwining themselves in mine. I tried to pull away, shocked at first, but mindful of the last occasion when I had reacted unfavourably to his touch I ceased resisting. So Sarat was a Vulcan, and unused to demonstrativeness. But we were friends too, and things like racial differences and ancestral pride do not matter when friendship comes first.

"I never thanked you," he said softly.

"For what?"

"For saving my life."

"You would have done the same thing."

"Of course, but it put you in danger also, and I promised..." He broke off abruptly, and bit his lip.

"Go on," I urged. "You promised whom?" A glimmer of light was beginning to penetrate the darkness.

He looked like a small boy who has been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "I promised Commander Spock that I would..."

"Keep an eye on me?"

"Yes. But how did you...?"

"He asked the same thing of me. We've been set up, Sarat. What

poor specimens we must have been."

"What gives you the impression we are any better now?" Sarat asked without a trace of bitterness or amusement in his voice.

"You are the better for acknowledging the friendship that has grown between you."

A deep melodious voice spoke from the doorway. Guiltily I jumped off the bed and stood to attention before the First Officer.

"At ease, Lieutenant." Spock sounded amused. "You bear the expression of enlightenment."

"With respect, sir, I had not expected deception to be your forte."

Sarat looked horrified.

Spock folded his arms and endured my tirade. "Yes, Lieutenant, I do admit to behaving in a somewhat underhand manner, but to be honest, I do not really think I need have bothered. Your awareness of each other was already present, the friendship only needed time to develop. Do you not feel that you have benefitted?"

"I'm not sure," I said grudgingly.

"That is your stock reply, but as I recall you would not have shown such insubordinate behaviour to your senior officer a few weeks ago."

Recalling what I had said I regretted the hasty words, but they had been spoken and could not be retracted.

"I apologise, Commander Spock. I really don't know what came over me."

"You were angry, and rightly so. No matter; this conversation is strictly off the record. But you have not answered my question."

"Yes, sir, I have benefitted, and I feel that I have improved - just a little - due to your confidence in me and my desire to be efficient in your eyes, though when Sarat had his accident I felt I had let you down because I promised to keep an eye on him."

"But the accident was not your fault." It was Sarat who spoke.

"I know that now. But not being able to devote as much time to you as I would have liked, and you being of rather the elusive kind, I felt so guilty."

"Sarat?" Spock turned his attention to the younger Vulcan.

"I have learned that Vulcans cannot always survive alone. The path we choose to follow is often a solitary one, but it is not advisable to choose that path and then think it can be applied effectively in an institution such as Starfleet. I have often shunned the company of Humans and ridiculed their need of each other, but it is comforting to know that there is someone to turn to in my time of need, and questions will not be asked. Alison accepts me for what I am."

"Not spoken like a true Vulcan," I pointed out.

"Sarat has learned a valuable lesson, just as I did many years ago. There is never one true path for Vulcans; each must discover his own. And what of you, Alison - what have you learned?"

"That I am stronger than I thought; and it is better to think of how others feel rather than of your own problems, real or imagined; and that given time and patience I can be of real use to the Federation."

"Good." Spock seemed satisfied. "Then this training voyage can be counted as a success."

I followed him into the corridor.

"You planned all along that Sarat and I should benefit from this voyage, didn't you, sir?"

"First Officer's discretion, Lieutenant," Spock replied. "Shall we say, I was hoping that fate would help you appreciate one another, and even though things did not go quite as planned, it all 'turned out all right in the end', as I believe the saying goes."

"I only wish Sarat hadn't been hurt in the process."

"Even I have no control over the elements," Spock said, deadpan.

But as he disappeared into a nearby turboshaft I had this image of him standing on the bridge like some darkly satanic Prospero, calling up a tempest to help ensnare his victims, and by doing so moulding their every action to serve his purpose. I grinned. It was an intriguing thought, but highly unlikely. Vulcans had many strange abilities, but the casting of magic spells was not among them... or was it? The spell Spock had cast over me had been very effective; my heaviness of heart had evaporated, and I felt confident enough to tackle anything.

"Sarat," I called, "set up another game. I'm going to show you how we play chess in Boston."

